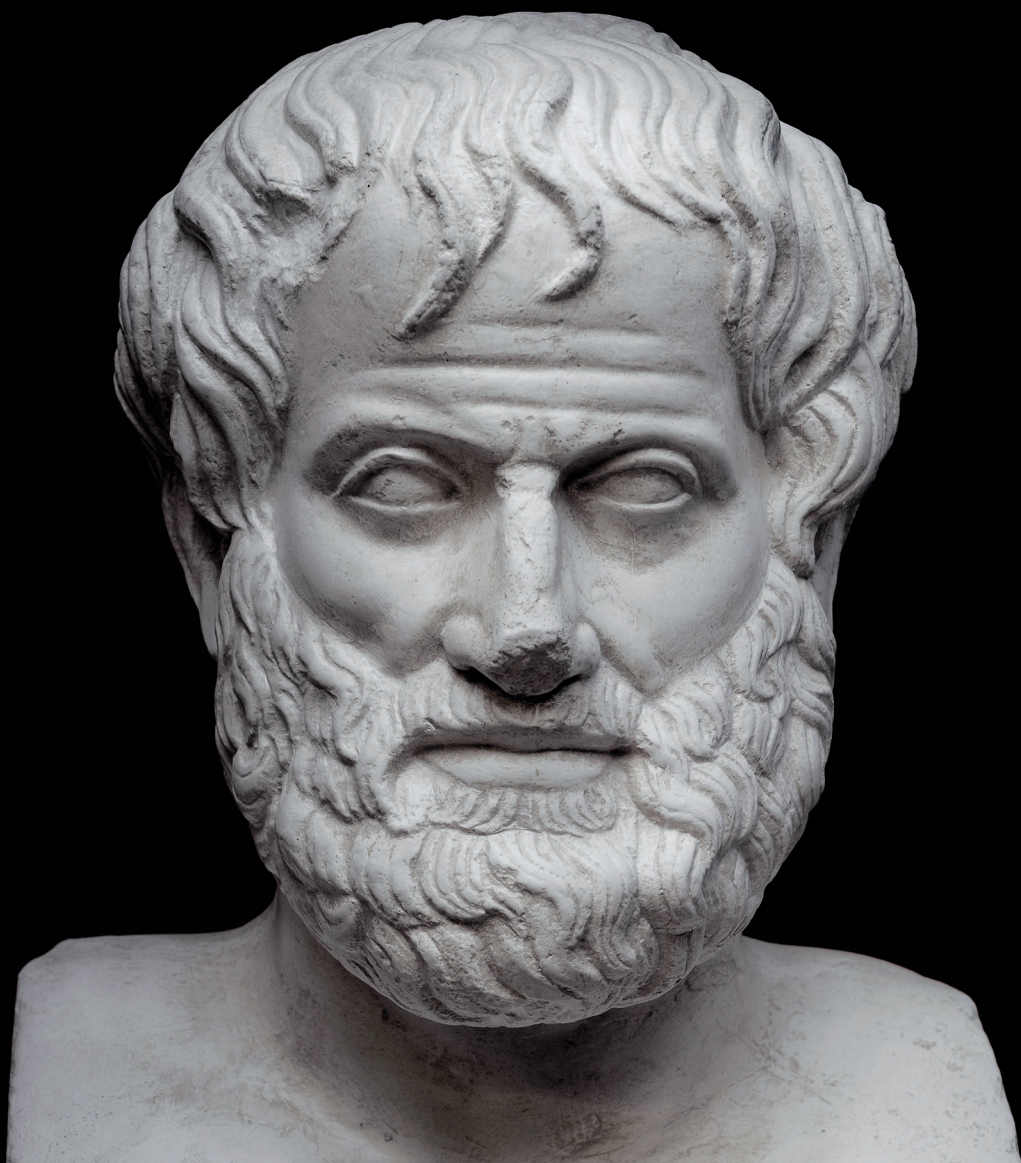


Aristotle on the Uses of Contemplation

Matthew D. Walker



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ARISTOTLE ON THE USES OF CONTEMPLATION

Traditionally, Aristotle is held to believe that philosophical contemplation is valuable for its own sake, but ultimately useless. In this volume, Matthew D. Walker offers a fresh, systematic account of Aristotle's views on contemplation's place in the human good. The book situates Aristotle's views against the background of his wider philosophy and examines the complete range of available textual evidence (including neglected passages from Aristotle's *Protrepticus*). On this basis, Walker argues that contemplation also benefits humans as living organisms by authoritatively guiding human life-activity, including human self-maintenance. Aristotle's views on contemplation's place in the human good thus cohere with his broader thinking about how perishable organisms live well. A novel exploration of Aristotle's views on theory and practice, this volume will interest scholars and students of both ancient Greek ethics and natural philosophy. It will also appeal to those working in other disciplines including classics, contemporary ethics, and political theory.

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ARISTOTLE ON THE USES OF CONTEMPLATION

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Note on Texts, Translations, and Abbreviations

For Plato and Aristotle, I have used Oxford editions when possible, Budé and Loeb editions when necessary, and other editions when appropriate (e.g., as with Aristotle's *De Motu Animalium* and Plato's *Alcibiades*). Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own, although I have consulted several good translations, which are mentioned in the [Bibliography](#). Given how much can turn on Aristotle's choice of words, I have sought to provide extremely literal "Eek" translations. Although often barbarous, such translations, I believe, serve a useful philosophical purpose.

For Aristotelian works, I use the following abbreviations:

<i>An. Post.</i>	<i>Analytica Posteriora</i>
<i>DC</i>	<i>De Caelo</i>
<i>GC</i>	<i>On Generation and Corruption</i>
<i>DA</i>	<i>De Anima</i>
<i>Somn.</i>	<i>De Somno</i>
<i>Insomn.</i>	<i>De Insomnis</i>
<i>Long.</i>	<i>De Longitudine Vitae</i>
<i>Iuv.</i>	<i>De Iuventute et Senectute</i>
<i>Resp.</i>	<i>De Respiratione</i>
<i>HA</i>	<i>History of Animals</i>
<i>PA</i>	<i>On the Parts of Animals</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>De Motu Animalium</i>
<i>IA</i>	<i>De Ingressu Animalium</i>
<i>GA</i>	<i>Generation of Animals</i>
<i>EN</i>	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
<i>MM</i>	<i>Magna Moralia</i>
<i>EE</i>	<i>Eudemian Ethics</i>

How Can Useless Contemplation Be Central to the Human Good?

1.1 An Introduction to the Utility Question

For Aristotle, philosophical contemplation, or *theôria*, is, in some sense, the ultimate end for human beings. Contemplation is that for the sake of which our rational actions aim. The power to contemplate also has a special position in the human soul – for Aristotle, an integrated system of life-functions. Contemplation is the authoritative, or dominant, function for the sake of which the human soul’s subordinate functions (e.g., nutrition, perception, and practical reasoning) exist. As the *telos* of our rational actions and of our other life-functions, contemplation is, for Aristotle, the main organizing principle in our kind-specific good as human beings.

On standard readings of Aristotle, contemplation has another, striking feature: it is thoroughly useless. Choiceworthy for its own sake, and lacking subservience to any higher functions, contemplation is free and leisured. Its proper objects eternal and divine, contemplation does not concern itself with pressing issues in the contingent realm of human affairs. Unlike other life-functions, it seems, contemplation makes no contribution to human self-maintenance.¹

Standard readings of Aristotle’s remarks on contemplation’s uselessness are partly correct. On Aristotle’s account, contemplation’s objects *are* eternal and divine. Contemplation is *not* directly concerned with practical affairs. *Nor* does contemplation subserve any functions higher than itself. No higher functions exist in the human soul, after all, for contemplation usefully to subserve. So, Aristotle provides good reason to think that contemplation is, somehow, a useless activity.

¹ In referring to “standard readings,” I have in mind prominent interpretations of Aristotle on contemplation and its uselessness put forward, e.g., by Kathleen V. Wilkes, Thomas Nagel, Sarah Broadie, Jonathan Lear, John M. Cooper, Andrea Wilson Nightingale, and Martha C. Nussbaum, among others. I discuss these readings in Chapter 5, especially [Section 5.1](#).

But consider some of Aristotle's other views. Nature, Aristotle insists repeatedly, does nothing in vain. Perishable living organisms possess only useful parts and functions, which benefit their lives as whole. In particular, the authoritative functions of plants and nonhuman animals both characterize the lives of these organisms and constitute a useful means by which these organisms maintain themselves. Such functions are authoritative by guiding and directing the lives – and self-maintenance – of such organisms. Plants and nonhuman animals *live by* these functions. In doing so, such perishable organisms maintain and activate themselves as the kinds of organisms they are. Such organisms thereby approximate the eternal persistence and activity of Aristotle's god, the Prime Mover.

By construing contemplation as altogether useless for human self-maintenance, then, standard readings have unattractive implications. Contemplation, on such readings, proves both troublingly inert and detached from the rest of human life. On such readings, Aristotle's remarks on contemplation stand in worrisome tension with the core commitments of his natural teleology. Aristotle's defense of the contemplative life, such readings imply, conflicts with his view that nature supplies organisms only with useful parts and functions – parts and functions that conduce to an organism's self-maintenance and enable the organism, as far as possible, to approximate god's imperishable, active way of being. Standard readings, in short, render Aristotle's account of the human good strangely discontinuous with his general account of the good for living organisms.

And standard readings leave us with questions. If contemplation offers no benefits for maintaining the whole system of psychic functions constitutive of the human soul, then why, on Aristotle's view, should human beings ever possess the power to contemplate in the first place? Does nature not operate in vain by providing human beings with useless contemplative capacities? Instead of benefitting human beings, might not such capacities count instead as psychic appendages that waste resources, and interfere with functions, necessary for our self-maintenance? If contemplation does not guide or direct our other life-functions, how – if at all – is it *authoritative* within the human soul?

One might hold, of course, that contemplation is simply the best activity in which we can engage. Hence, one might infer, when nature supplies us with contemplative powers, nature does not work in vain. And that inference could well turn out to be sound. But on Aristotle's view, I contend, that will be so only on the condition that contemplation fully

enables us to approximate the divine – a task that includes contemplation’s facilitating the stable persistence of our all-too-mortal lives.

Aristotle’s remarks on contemplation generate *the utility question*: if contemplation is useless, how can it be central to the human good? In what follows, I explore and answer this question. In the first half of the book, I make a fuller case that the puzzle that I have just sketched indeed poses a real problem for Aristotle. In the second half, I offer a systematic response to the utility question, and I articulate a revisionary, broadly naturalistic reading of contemplation’s place in the human good. Against standard readings, I argue, contemplation of the eternal and divine actually *is* useful in the lives of rational animals. Contemplation is an integral function within the economy of human life-activities. Most controversially, I argue that, for Aristotle, contemplation actively guides and benefits the basic nutritive-reproductive (or threptic) functions required for self-maintenance. Aristotle’s defense of contemplation is consistent with his general account of the good for living organisms, and continuous with his account of the good for plants and nonhuman animals. His defense coheres, rather than conflicts, with his core teleological commitments.

Some, perhaps, may resist the thought that Aristotle faces the puzzle that I have just articulated. Yet even these readers can accept the account of contemplation’s usefulness that I develop. Even if such readers deny that contemplation *must be* useful in the way I argue, they can still accept that contemplation *can be* useful. For these readers, I offer a textually grounded account of how contemplation can play a more active role in human affairs than standard readings have proposed.

In the 1970s, Thomas Nagel and Kathleen V. Wilkes first saw that Aristotle’s defense of contemplation generated something like the utility question.² Both noticed that Aristotle’s remarks on contemplation’s uselessness raise puzzles about contemplation’s benefits for human beings. Both Nagel and Wilkes proposed, however, that Aristotle had theological resources to defend contemplation as authoritative and beneficial. They thought that Aristotle could defend contemplation’s centrality to the human good simply on the basis of contemplation’s status as a divine activity, one that the gods enjoy. Nevertheless, they agreed, Aristotle’s resulting account of contemplation’s contribution to the human good was discontinuous with his account of how the authoritative functions of other organisms benefited those organisms.

² See Nagel ([1972] 1980) and Wilkes ([1978] 1980).

Since then, debates concerning Aristotle's views on contemplation have centered on whether contemplation is happiness's sole constituent.³ While this question about Aristotle is important, it is nevertheless not the only question. In my view, scholars have yet to appreciate the full significance of Nagel's and Wilkes's insights concerning the tensions and puzzles that Aristotle's remarks on contemplation's uselessness introduce into Aristotle's account of the human good. Regardless of whether one thinks that contemplation is happiness's sole component, or whether one thinks that contemplation is only one of many goods constitutive of happiness, one faces – and must address – the utility question.

Hence, I revisit the issues that Nagel and Wilkes first opened up, yet which have since been neglected. I build on Nagel's and Wilkes's insights, but defend a novel account of contemplation's beneficial value. Contemplation, I argue, benefits human beings just as nutrition and reproduction benefit plants, and just as perception and locomotion benefit non-human animals. Contemplation, for Aristotle, contributes authoritative guidance over a human being's other life-activities – including the basic self-maintaining functions of nutrition and reproduction. Contemplation is how human beings live – well. On my reading, human beings *live by* contemplation in a rich and robust sense.

1.2 Some Matters of Method

My account of Aristotle on the uses of contemplation departs from two main approaches that initially tempt the Aristotle interpreter. The first approach doubts that any account of the human good that gives pride of place to contemplation could cohere well with Aristotle's biological and psychological commitments. Highlighting Aristotle's claims for contemplation's uselessness, this approach holds that one would be hard pressed to identify any role for contemplation in human self-maintenance. True, Aristotle admits that some goods are choiceworthy for their own sakes as well as for the sake of higher goods. And so, he allows some goods to be both ends and instrumentally useful for the sake of higher goods. But contemplation, unlike these other goods, is an ultimate end lacking choiceworthiness for the sake of any higher goods. Further, contemplation does not concern itself with human goods. Such an approach, then, would say little about how Aristotle's claims for contemplation's centrality to the

³ These debates were sparked by Hardie (1965). I address these debates in passing throughout Chapter 2, but most fully in Walker (2011).

human good cohere with Aristotelian claims concerning the ways in which the authoritative functions of other organisms benefit those organisms. Instead, this first approach would examine Aristotle's remarks on contemplation's value within a delimited context, perhaps appealing to aspects of Aristotle's theology (viz., the thought that god contemplates and that contemplation is incomparably valuable) to understand why Aristotle thinks contemplation so beneficial.

A contrasting, second approach would situate Aristotle's account of the human good precisely within its biological and psychological contexts. Yet this second approach would say little about contemplation and its orientation toward the divine – again assuming that contemplation of divine objects would have to be useless and irrelevant for self-maintenance. On this second approach, Aristotle's claims about contemplation and its objects either would have to be swept under the rug or explained away. Such an approach would give pride of place to practical wisdom in the human good, while trying to bracket Aristotle's embarrassing remarks on contemplative wisdom.

Against both of these approaches, I explain contemplation's role in the human good in a way that reconciles Aristotle's account with the core commitments of Aristotle's metaphysics, psychology, biology, and theology. Thus, I engage with, and defend my reading by reference to, the full Aristotelian corpus. My argument takes advantage of the full range of available textual evidence, including surviving fragments of Aristotle's lost *Protrepticus*, which recent scholarship has authenticated.⁴

In focusing principally on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but in approaching Aristotle holistically, I integrate insights from various works throughout the Aristotelian corpus. In doing so, I address certain interpretive issues more briefly (and less deeply) than might an atomistic approach, which would focus on specific problems and texts in isolation from the larger corpus. Although I focus more on the forest than on particular trees, a holistic approach to Aristotle is reasonable on three main grounds. (1) Aristotle himself invites a holistic approach by explicitly introducing key metaphysical, psychological, and biological principles in the *Nicomachean Ethics* itself, especially in I.7's function argument. Theological themes also pervade the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Likewise, Aristotle explicitly appeals to metaphysical and natural philosophical principles in his *Politics*.⁵ Yes, as interpreters, we can understand the *Nicomachean Ethics* by itself – on a first reading, at least

⁴ See Hutchinson and Johnson (2005) and unpublished work A.

⁵ See, e.g., *Politics* I.2, 1252a26–b5; 1252b31–1253a1; 1253a9; a20–26; I.5, 1254a21–33; I.8, 1256b20–22; II.5, 1263a41–b1; III.3, 1276b4–13; VII.8, 1328a21–25.

to some extent – without appealing to Aristotle’s views in other works. Yet an appeal to other parts of Aristotle’s corpus, I argue, is nevertheless necessary for the *fullest* understanding of Aristotle’s ethical views.⁶ (2) Aristotle does not present his works as parts of a wholly worked-out system. But Aristotle’s occasional cross-references to his other works (e.g., *EN* I.6, 1096b7–8; I.13, 1102a16–28; X.4, 1174b2–4) suggest that he sees his works mutually supporting one another, at least on some points.⁷ (3) As a practical matter, the holistic approach enables us to make sense of Aristotle’s most puzzling remarks on contemplation and its place in the human good. Hence, this approach is useful for the discoveries it yields.

In *An. Post.* I.7, Aristotle holds that the various sciences are autonomous, and that one may not apply principles from one science to another science. Such a claim might seem to militate against a holistic approach. Perhaps Aristotle denies that one may fruitfully apply principles from metaphysics or psychology to ethics and politics.⁸ Yet Aristotle also grants that principles that apply to one science may also apply to another science, provided that one science (e.g., geometry) encompasses another (e.g., optics) (*An. Post.* I.7, 75b14–17; I.13, 78b34–79a16). Human beings, however, are composite substances and living organisms. Hence, insofar as the objects studied by ethics and political science are the same objects studied by metaphysics and natural science, metaphysical and natural-scientific principles can still apply to ethics and political science. The claims of ethics and political science should at least not conflict with more encompassing metaphysical and natural-scientific principles. Further, as noted, Aristotle in practice appeals to metaphysical, psychological, and theological principles in his ethics and politics. Therefore, Aristotle accepts only a limited autonomy for the sciences, and allows for a holistic approach to his corpus.⁹

⁶ On the systematic, or holistic, approach to Aristotle’s ethics, see the programmatic remarks in Irwin (1980), developed more fully in (1988). See also Reeve (2012: ix). On how attending to metaphysics can deepen our understanding of the *EN*, see Achtenberg (2002: ch. 3). On Aristotle’s ethics in relation to his biology, especially, see Henry and Nielsen (2015), and the essays in their collection.

⁷ Note Aristotle’s references to other works (including the *Analytics*) at *EE* I.6, 1217a16–17; I.8, 1217b16–23 and 1217b26–29; II.6, 1222b37–38; II.10, 1227a9–11; VIII.3, 1249b15. Aristotle refers to his ethical works, in turn, at *Metaphysics* A.1, 981b25.

⁸ See Roche (1988a: 53–54), who argues that Aristotle’s method in the *EN* is wholly dialectical. Others (e.g., Scott [2015: ch. 7] and perhaps Kraut [2016: Section 3.2]) argue that appeal to metaphysical and psychological principles is, at best, optional. I address such issues, as well as worries about the differing kinds of precision appropriate the theoretical and practical sciences, further in Chapter 7. But for general replies to such worries, see Shields (2015) and Leunissen (2015).

⁹ See Karbowski (2012: 324–325) and Henry and Nielsen (2015: 2). M. Johnson (2015: 178–186) argues that political science (as a practical science) must be subalternate to theoretical sciences. Cf. Salkever (1990: 115).

At a local level, I also read the *Nicomachean Ethics* itself holistically. I examine the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a unified work with a unified argument. Those who approach the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a patchwork treatise might view my approach as worrisome and naïve. Skeptical about the *Nicomachean Ethics*' unity, they contend that perhaps a later editor, say, Andronicus of Rhodes, compiled the work in its current form. Such readers deny the work to be a "book" in anything like the modern sense.¹⁰ Some such readers insist that the *Nicomachean Ethics* offers an obviously incoherent picture of happiness, one that first portrays happiness as an inclusive end in *EN* I–IX, but later – inconsistently – depicts happiness as an exclusive end in *EN* X. For further signs of the treatise's patchwork nature, other such readers point to the treatise's inclusion of two allegedly independent books on friendship (*EN* VIII–IX) and its two apparently different, and allegedly inconsistent, accounts of pleasure (in *EN* VII and X). Finally, they note that Books V–VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are identical to Books IV–VI of the *Eudemian Ethics*. Hence, if the *Eudemian Ethics* was written first, then the *Nicomachean Ethics* contains three "common" books culled from an earlier work.

In response, I note, first, that any conjectures that Andronicus himself put together the *Nicomachean Ethics* are highly speculative. Jonathan Barnes, who has questioned the work's unity, himself admits that the evidence for Andronicus' editorship of Aristotle's works is "meagre."¹¹ As Barnes notes, Plutarch – a key source for the view that Andronicus compiled the works of Aristotle – says only that Andronicus "published" Aristotle's manuscripts. Likewise, Barnes advises caution with Porphyry's claims that Andronicus "divided the works of Aristotle into treatises, collecting related material into the same place." Such reports need not imply that Andronicus *constructed* the works in their current form.¹² Second, claims for the *Nicomachean Ethics*' patchwork incoherence have been much exaggerated. The alleged incoherencies in the *Nicomachean* text, as multiple other scholars have argued, result from overly hasty readings of the work as we now have it.¹³ The *Nicomachean* text shows a ring-composition, an organizing feature shared by other unitary ancient texts,

¹⁰ See, e.g., Annas (1993: 216n1) and Barnes (1995: 11).

¹¹ Barnes ([1997] 2015: 435). For doubts about the *EN*'s unity, see Barnes ([1997] 2015: 466n252).

¹² Barnes ([1997] 2015: 447). I have benefitted from Rochnik (unpublished).

¹³ Pakaluk (2011) offers a particularly acute – and, I believe, generally correct – analysis of the *EN* as a unity. Pakaluk explains (1) the two discussions of happiness (in Books I and X); (2) the coherence of the different accounts of pleasure in Books VII and X; and (3) the place of Books VIII and IX on friendship within the whole. In different ways, the work of, e.g., Kraut (1989) and G. Lear (2004) shows the general implausibility of simply assuming that Book X is inconsistent with the rest of the

including Plato's *Republic*.¹⁴ And later parts of the *Nicomachean* text include probable back references to significantly earlier parts of the text, displaying another kind of textual unity.¹⁵

Therefore, I adopt, as a defeasible methodological assumption, the view that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is best read as a whole.¹⁶ (And in the absence of any specific reason to think otherwise, I assume, as a default, that Aristotle composed it as such.) Nor is my choice to read the work as a whole idiosyncratic: I join most other recent commentators in reading the *Nicomachean Ethics* this way. Ultimately, any unity in the *Nicomachean Ethics* should be discovered and explained. Yet the same follows for any disunity or incoherence. We must look and see. If a later editor did compile the *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, this editor knew what he was doing. As Carlo Natali contends, the *Nicomachean Ethics* is "a skillful construction, the fruit of a mature intelligence."¹⁷ As for the alleged challenge posed by the *Eudemian Ethics*, one can assume for argument's sake that the *Eudemian* treatise dates from before the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Even then, however, nothing prevents the *Nicomachean Ethics* from constituting a unity. For nothing prevents an author from using material originally composed for one work and finding an integral place for it within another. In our own day, academic books regularly repurpose material originally intended for academic conferences and professional journals. Although including material from disparate sources, such books need not thereby lack structural, argumentative, or generic unity.

The task of reconciling Aristotle's views on contemplation in the human good with his general views on the good for living organisms has led me, as it has led others, to reassess Aristotle's relationship with his teacher, Plato. A certain traditional view of this relationship – which I call, after Raphael's painting, the "School of Athens picture" – portrays Aristotle in fundamental conflict with Plato.¹⁸ One finds a version of this view in Werner Jaeger's influential narrative of Aristotle's career as a progressive series of steps away from Plato.¹⁹ Yet unitarian readers – who attribute a fairly

EN. On the compatibility of the ENVII and ENX accounts of pleasure, see, e.g., Shields (2011). I say more about the place of the friendship books in Chapter 8.

¹⁴ See Natali (2007: 369; 374–375) and Lockwood (2014).

¹⁵ See, e.g., EN IX.3, 1165a12–14; IX.9, 1169b28–30; b30–33; 1170a14–16; X.6, 1176b24–26; X.7, 1178a4–6. Cf. Irwin (2007: 151).

¹⁶ Cf. Kraut (1989: 20). ¹⁷ Natali (2007: 381).

¹⁸ Or perhaps "the vulgar School of Athens picture." Hare (2007: 7–12) emphasizes Raphael's harmonized portrayal of Plato and Aristotle.

¹⁹ See Jaeger (1962), which I discuss in Section 7.5. In his own developmental story, Owen (1965) portrays the early Aristotle as an anti-Platonist.

consistent doctrine to Aristotle throughout all stages of his career – can also accept this conflictual view of Aristotle and Plato.

Aristotle does, to be sure, criticize Plato on multiple issues. But the similarities between Plato and Aristotle are, to my mind, usually more interesting than their differences, and I believe that one should not overstate Aristotle's differences with his teacher.²⁰ Hence, I often attend to how Aristotle engages with particular Platonic views, especially on key issues in moral psychology and ethics. When we do so attend, we will typically see Aristotle developing Platonic views, though sometimes in surprising new directions.

1.3 A Quick Stroll down the *Peripatos*

As Aristoxenus, a late fourth-century Peripatetic, wrote, “[a] foreknowledge of the road we must travel will enable us to recognize each stage as we reach it, and so lighten the toil of the journey.”²¹ Here, then, is a map of what follows.

Chapter 2 spells out Aristotle's views on theoretical contemplation and its status as a highest good. Scholars have long debated whether Aristotle's account of happiness is an exclusive or an inclusive one (i.e., whether contemplation is the sole component of happiness, or whether happiness includes goods other than contemplation). The debate between exclusive and inclusive interpreters of Aristotle on happiness, alas, shows no sign of abating. Thus, I adopt a stance that remains neutral on some aspects of the traditional debate. No matter how this debate turns out, I argue, contemplation will, *in some sense*, be an ultimate end within a human life. Hence, exclusivists and inclusivists have good reason to take the utility question seriously. Along the way, I sketch the nature and proper objects of contemplation. I focus especially on Aristotle's claims for contemplation's uselessness and leisureliness in his “aristocratic” defense of contemplation's status as an ultimate end.

In Chapter 3, I begin to situate Aristotle's account within the broader context of his views on the good for living organisms. In particular, I examine the self-maintenance requirements, and nutritive-reproductive functions, of perishable living organisms. These functions, I suggest,

²⁰ For work that emphasizes continuities between Plato and Aristotle, see, e.g., G. Lear (2004: 5); Gerson (2005); Sheffield (2006). As Linck (2006: 44n1) notes, such an approach was common among medieval Arabic philosophers. See, e.g., Alfarabi's *The Harmonization of the Opinions of the Two Sages, Plato the Divine and Aristotle*.

²¹ Aristoxenus, *Elementa Harmonica* II.1 (quoted by Natali [2007: 371]).

address a fundamental set of needs that Aristotle's account of the good for any mortal beings – including human contemplators – must consider.

Chapter 4 builds on these claims by examining perception, the defining power of nonhuman animal life. For Aristotle, perception is the authoritative function in animal life, and *authoritative* in two senses. Perception is the power *subserv*ed by an animal's lower-level threptic functions. Perception, however, also *guides* an animal's lower-level threptic activity. On the basis of Aristotle's remarks on plant and animal life, I provide a generalized account of Aristotle's views on the good for living organisms as such, and of how such organisms attain their good by approximating the divine. On my reading, living organisms approximate the divine and attain their good by persisting and being active *as* the kinds of beings they are, i.e., by exercising their authoritative functions as part of a full, self-maintaining pattern of life-activity.

Chapter 5, then, reconsiders Aristotle's remarks on contemplation's role in the human good against the backdrop of Aristotle's general account of the good for living organisms, and spells out the utility question in fullest detail. For contemplation – if inert, useless, and incapable of guiding lower life-functions – will prevent human beings from fully approximating the divine. I explore, but reject, some initial responses to the utility question. In particular, I explore the proposal that contemplative *nous* offers a legitimate exception to the principle that the authoritative functions of living organisms should play some useful role in guiding those organisms' other life-functions. I argue that, for Aristotle, the human possession of contemplative *nous* is properly constrained by the "nature does nothing in vain" principle, and that contemplative *nous* is an integral function of the human soul. The utility question persists.

Chapter 6 begins my response to the utility question. I temporarily bracket Aristotle's distinction between contemplative and practical intellect. Instead, I examine what role Aristotle thinks reason as a *general* power of the human soul plays in guiding perceptive and nutritive-reproductive functioning. I focus on reason's guidance of *epithumia* (appetite) and *thumos* (spirit). These two forms of nonrational desire, which Aristotle's moral psychology borrows from Plato, both directly and indirectly help maintain rational and nonhuman animals. But these forms of nonrational desire seek immediate satisfaction. So, for *epithumia* and *thumos* to function well in human beings, reason as a general power must regulate them so that they harmonize with reason's assessment of what provides for long-term benefit within a complete life. Thus, reason as a general power indirectly guides good nutritive-reproductive activity by regulating

nonrational desire. Aristotle highlights the *practical* intellect's role in regulating human nonrational desire (and hence, in guiding nutritive-reproductive activity). Yet his remarks on reason as a general power provide clues toward solving the utility question. If the contemplative intellect perfects the practical intellect, then the contemplative intellect has an indirect role in guiding a human being's lower life-functions – including, fundamentally, a human being's nutritive-reproductive functions.

But what sort of indirect guidance role? [Chapter 7](#) examines Aristotle's remarks on the role that one's articulate understanding of the human good plays in one's possessing *phronêsis*, or practical wisdom. If contemplation provides such understanding, then contemplation can perfect the practical intellect in a way that will resolve the utility question. To show how contemplation plays this guidance role, I examine a neglected, but crucial, argument in Aristotle's *Protrepticus*, which addresses worries about contemplation's uselessness. This *utility argument* exhorts its audience to pursue contemplation on the basis of its usefulness for deriving "boundary markers" of the human good, standards by reference to which human beings can judge well. After defending the propriety of appealing to the *Protrepticus* to address the utility question, I spell out the *Protrepticus*' proposal. Further, I defend the consistency of Aristotle's utility argument with Aristotle's aristocratic defense of contemplation.

Exactly how can contemplation of eternal and divine objects provide useful cognitive access to boundary markers of the distinctively human good? [Chapter 8](#) tackles this question. In response, the *Protrepticus* suggests that contemplating the divine clarifies the upper and lower limits of the human good (as distinct from the good for gods and for nonhuman animals). The *Nicomachean Ethics*, I contend, implicitly commits itself to a similar view. I examine Aristotle's views from *EN IX* on how contemplating friends elicits self-awareness, and point out limitations that friends have in this respect. By contemplating the divine, I propose, *theôroi* have access to another source of self-awareness free from these limitations. Aristotle's account of contemplation's role in self-awareness concludes in Book X, not in Book IX. Contemplation of the divine, I argue, completes a human agent's self-awareness: it reveals key similarities between the divine and the human, while elucidating essential human limitations.

[Chapter 9](#) shows how the boundary markers of the human good to which contemplation provides cognitive access are useful in practical reasoning. I show how the boundary marker of the human good that contemplators derive through contemplation explains the notions of excess and deficiency at play in Aristotle's accounts of each of the ethical virtues.

I conclude, in [Chapter 10](#), by responding to some remaining questions and worries that my interpretation generates.

In sum: even if contemplation has the divine objects Aristotle explicitly insists it does, contemplation still has a role in meeting basic vital human needs. Even if contemplation is useless in a certain sense, contemplation can still be useful in the way that Aristotle's broader views suggest it should be. Ultimately, I contend, Aristotle's account of the human good is fully at home in Aristotle's larger vision of the world.

Useless Contemplation as an Ultimate End

2.1 Rereading the *Nicomachean Ethics*' Opening Chapters

What is contemplation's place in the human good? Indeed, what is contemplation in the first place? In this chapter, I argue that, for Aristotle, contemplation is, *in some sense*, an ultimate end. Yet one can accept this view, I suggest, regardless of whether one thinks that Aristotle's account of happiness is (1) an exclusive one (according to which contemplation is the sole component of happiness) or (2) an inclusive one (according to which happiness includes both contemplation and other goods). In examining Aristotle's views on contemplation and its status as (in some sense) an ultimate end, I focus on Aristotle's claims for contemplation's *uselessness*. These claims are central to Aristotle's case for contemplation's status as (in some sense) an ultimate end. These claims also generate deep tensions in Aristotle's account of the human good – tensions that I explore in later chapters.

To plunge into these seas, I begin by looking afresh at the *Nicomachean Ethics*' opening chapters. In *EN* I.2, Aristotle identifies the supreme human good as the ultimate or most complete (τέλειον) end achievable in action, and as the object of political science, the most authoritative practical science.¹ In *EN* I.4, he identifies this good as happiness (*eudaimonia*), and appeals to reputable opinions that happiness is to be found in living and acting well (τὸ . . . εὖ ζῆν καὶ τὸ εὖ πράττειν: 1095a19). Happiness and living, in other words, are inextricably linked. This point will be central to my interpretation. So, how does the *Nicomachean Ethics* introduce it?

¹ Cf. *EN* I.2, 1094a18–28 with I.7, 1097a28–30. Throughout, I usually translate τέλειον as “complete.” Other possible translations are “final” and “perfect.” In many cases, these other translations might be preferable, but I choose “complete” for its relative neutrality on certain (though not all) issues of nuance. Completeness in Aristotle, I take it, has the sense of finality: for *X* to be complete is for *X* to be finished (and, to that extent, an end). Completeness also has the sense of perfection: for *X* to be complete is for *X* to have attained fulfillment and to be lacking none of *X*'s parts. On τέλειον, see *Metaphysics* Δ.16.

Aristotle grants that it is uncontroversial to identify happiness as the highest good. He emphasizes, however, our need still to get clear about this good's content (*EN* I.4, 1095a17–28). Hence, *EN* I.5, like its parallel discussion in *EE* I.4, surveys and assesses three different lives (*bioi*) that reputable opinion proposes as best. Aristotle rules out the first candidate *bios* – the pleasure-centered life – on the grounds that it is a “life for cattle” (βοσκημάτων βίον: 1095b20). He also rules out a certain base model of the political life: its apparent goal – honor – is “too superficial” (ἐπιπολαιότερον: 1095b24). Honor is all-too-dependent on those others who confer it; yet happiness should be a stable good, one that is proper to, and dependent on, the person who possesses it. Moreover, honor's choiceworthiness implies the existence of goods higher than it. After all, we seek to be honored because honor confirms our sense of our own virtue. Hence, we seek recognition from the virtuous and the practically wise. Virtue, then, seems to be both a higher good than honor and the true end of the political life (1095b22–30). Virtue itself, however, is too incomplete (ἀτελεστέρα) an end to count as the ultimate end of the happiest life. For the *exercise* of virtue is more complete than its mere possession. The sleeping person is not happy, nor is someone whose miserable circumstances stunt his opportunities for virtuous action (1095b30–1096a4).

Does Aristotle, then, identify the exercise of virtue as the highest end of the happiest life? Aristotle never explicitly rejects virtuous activity as such an end. But Aristotle does not conclude his discussion here, and he expresses his wish to be more precise about *what sort* of virtuous activity serves as this end. Thus, having ruled out the pleasure-centered and political lives as best for human beings, Aristotle ends his initial examination of the three lives by referring to the contemplative life (ὁ θεωρητικός), which he promises to examine “in the following” (1096a4–5). *EN* I.5 says no more about the contemplative life. A few features of I.5's “comparison of lives” argument, however, deserve notice.

EN I.5's *first* noteworthy feature is that it allows singular, monistic goods – such as pleasure, honor, virtue, and contemplation – in some sense to constitute the ends of lives.² So, even at this early point in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle apparently assumes a *dominant-end view of happiness and happy lives*, according to which some monistic good (to be determined) constitutes the happiest life's paramount aim. Such a good plays a special role both in characterizing this life and in determining its happiness.

² Cf. G. Lear (2004: 23–25).

EN I.5's *second* noteworthy feature is its appeal to a certain teleological principle for evaluating various candidate dominant ends. This *completeness principle* is implicit throughout Book I's opening chapters, but receives its clearest formulation at *EN* I.7, 1097a30–34. According to this principle, the completeness, finality, or end-status of some end *E* is coextensive with *E*'s choiceworthiness for its own sake.³ To understand Aristotle's point, consider the following simple hierarchy of ends: *A* is choiceworthy for the sake of *B*, *B* is choiceworthy for the sake of *C*, and *C* is choiceworthy for the sake of no higher end. In this hierarchy, Aristotle thinks, *B* is more complete than *A* because *B* is more choiceworthy for its own sake than *A*. Although *A* is choiceworthy for the sake of *B*, *B* is not choiceworthy for the sake of *A*. Likewise, *C* is more complete than *A* or *B* because *A* and *B* together are both choiceworthy for the sake of *C*, but *C* is not choiceworthy for the sake of either *A* or *B*. In this chain of ends, *C* is the most complete or ultimate end. For *C* is the end most choiceworthy for its own sake.

Hence, Aristotle implies, any candidate for the ultimate (monistic) end within the happiest life, *U*, should meet the following conditions: (1) *U* is choiceworthy for its own sake; (2) *U* is that end for the sake of which all lower ends are choiceworthy; and (3) *U* is choiceworthy for the sake of no (monistic) end higher than itself (within that life). For if *U* were valuable for the sake of an even more complete end (*U**), then *U* would not be highest or ultimate.⁴ By appealing to the completeness principle, Aristotle argues that wealth, honor, and virtue cannot be contenders for the happiest life's dominant end. Wealth fails to meet any of these conditions. Honor and virtue, while meeting condition (1), fail to meet conditions (2) and (3). All these ends are choiceworthy for the sake of monistic ends higher than themselves.

EN I.5's *third* noteworthy feature is its reference to contemplation as a potential dominant end within the happiest life. In *EN* I.5, Aristotle does not criticize the contemplative life. Indeed, he says that he will examine it "in the following" (ἐν τοῖς ἐπομένοις). Aristotle could be alluding to *EN* X.7–8's discussion of contemplation. Aristotle's reference to "the following," however, appears at the very beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Therefore, one may also construe "the following" (at 1096a4–5) as *the rest of*

³ Although I speak of "choiceworthiness" in what follows, the more cumbersome "such-as-to-be-chosen" conveys the ambiguity in Aristotle's notion of being αἰρετόν. A αἰρετόν end can be normatively worthy of choice, but it can also be an end that (merely) happens to be chosen. I owe this point to Jennifer Whiting.

⁴ See Kraut (1989: 193).

the work to come. On this reading, Aristotle leaves open the possibility that the *Nicomachean Ethics as a whole* will investigate the happiest life construed as the contemplative life. The *Nicomachean Ethics*' text underdetermines which reading to follow. Yet this neglected alternative offers a sensible reading of the text. If Aristotle intends this reading, then he is signaling, if subtly, that the contemplative life as a whole will be the *Nicomachean Ethics*' focus. If not, he at least signals that contemplation remains a contender for the happiest life's dominant end. In either case, *EN* I.5 introduces the contemplative life as a viable contender for the happiest life. Thus, Aristotle also suggests that he could accept an *intellectualist* account of the happiest life, one that identifies a certain intellectual activity, contemplation, as that life's dominant end.

From the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, then, Aristotle allows for the possibility that contemplation is, in some way, the end around which the happiest life will be ordered. If Aristotle commits himself in *EN* I.5 to exploring and unpacking the contemplative life in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a whole, then he allows this possibility explicitly. If he does not, but indicates only that he will consider the contemplative life later in *EN* X.7–8, Aristotle at least remains open to considering contemplation as the happiest life's dominant end. This is a *first* major point on which both exclusivist and inclusivist readers of Aristotle can agree.⁵

2.2 Life-Activity “According to the Best and Most Complete” Virtue

The *Nicomachean Ethics*' opening chapters rule out certain proposals for the nature of the happiest life. After articulating happiness' formal features – its completeness and self-sufficiency – *EN* I.7 appeals to the human function (ἐργον) to specify happiness further (1097b23–25). Aristotle identifies an organism's function as the sort of life-activity (ζωή) it exercises. On this basis, Aristotle denies that the life-activity of plants – the “nutritive and growth-oriented life” (τὴν τε θρεπτικὴν καὶ τὴν αὐξητικὴν ζωήν: 1098a1) – is the human function. The same holds for a

⁵ For exclusivist readers who would accept this claim, see Kraut (1989: 5; though see his remarks on inclusivism and exclusivism in 8n13); G. Lear (2004); Cooper ([2003] 2004: 301). For inclusivist proposals that may identify contemplation as a dominant end (though not necessarily as the sole component) of happiness, see White (1990: 134–135); Richardson (1992: 349–350); Shields (2007: 345); Irwin (2007: 149–152); and Walker (2011). As discussed in n19 in this chapter, I also count Charles (1999). Such forms of inclusivism gain support from *MM* I.2, 1184a33–38, which claims that any monistic good, *qua* monistic (μόνη οὐσα), is too incomplete to constitute *eudaimonia* as a whole, even if that good is the best of monistic goods.

“certain perceptive” life (αἰσθητική τις: 1098a2). For such a life is shared by every (nonrational) animal (1098a2–3). Through elimination, Aristotle identifies the human function as “a certain practical [life: i.e., ζωή] of that having reason” (πρακτική τις τοῦ λόγον ἔχοντος: 1098a3–4).

Aristotle initially distinguishes two aspects of the human soul’s rational element. The first aspect is rational *qua* “obedient to reason” (ἐπιπειθὲς λόγῳ). The other aspect is rational *qua* “thinking” (διανοοῦμενον) (1098a4–5). In *EN* I.13, Aristotle compares the former, reason-responsive aspect to a youth “listening to his father” (ὥσπερ τοῦ πατρὸς ἀκουστικόν). The former aspect “shares” (μετέχουσα) in reason (1102b13–14). The latter aspect, by contrast, displays a certain paternal authority: indeed, it is rational “authoritatively and in itself” (κυρίως καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ 1103a2–3). *EE* II.1 proposes the same division between authoritatively rational and reason-respective parts of the soul. (In this context, I note, *EE* II.1 also considers whether the soul possesses or lacks parts [εἰ μεριστὴ ἡ ψυχὴ οὐτ’ εἰ ἀμερής]. Aristotle clarifies, however, that by “parts,” he could mean powers, and is not necessarily committed to the view that the soul is divisible [1219b32–36].⁶)

EN I.7’s initial remarks on the human function are broadly continuous with I.5’s remarks on the happiest life. *EN* I.5 suggests that a *bios*, or way of life, organized around *contemplation* could be happiest. In *EN* I.7, Aristotle explicitly identifies a *zôê*, or mode of life-activity, organized around *thinking* as the human function. To show, however, that the human good consists in a certain exercise of this *zôê* – i.e., activity of soul “according to reason or not without reason” – Aristotle introduces the normative premise that where some *X* has a function *F*, *X*’s good consists in *X*’s excellent (i.e., virtuous) performance of *F* (cf. *EN* II.6, 1106a15–17). On these grounds, Aristotle identifies the human good as “activity of the soul according to virtue (κατ’ ἀρετήν), and if there are many virtues, then according to the best and most complete (κατὰ τὴν ἀρίστην καὶ τελειοτάτην)” (1098a16–18).

No one doubts that Aristotle recognizes multiple virtues. Aristotle’s claim that happiness will consist in activity “according to the best and most complete” virtue, however, is once again open to competing interpretations. Aristotle might commit himself to the *exclusive* view that happiness *qua* virtuous life-activity consists solely in the exercise of one highest virtue. Or, Aristotle could accept an *inclusive* view that allows happiness to contain more than one sort of virtuous activity – indeed, all

⁶ On problems with divisibility, see *DA* I.5, 411a24–b14. On the sense in which Aristotle accepts that the soul has parts, see (especially) Corcilius and Gregoric (2010) and Shields (2016: 185–186).

the activities of intellectual and ethical virtue combined. I argue briefly that Aristotle identifies one particular virtue as highest. Yet this is nevertheless a *second* major point on which *both* exclusivist *and* inclusivist readers can agree.

Consider J. L. Ackrill's inclusive reading of 1098a16–18. According to this *composite virtue reading*, “the best and most complete” virtue is a second-order compound containing the complete set of first-order intellectual and ethical virtues. Hence, Ackrill maintains, happiness consists in activity according to total virtue.⁷ Yet Aristotelian references to “the best and most complete” virtue have an exclusionary ring.⁸ *EN* X.7's opening lines, which recall the function argument's conclusion, show this exclusionary tendency most clearly: “But if *eudaimonia* is activity according to virtue (κατ' ἀρετήν), [it is] reasonable [for it to be activity] according to the greatest (κατὰ τὴν κρατίστην). But this would be [the virtue] of the best (τοῦ ἀρίστου)” (1177a12–13). Here, Aristotle does not have in mind total virtue. Instead, he is singling out the proper virtue of the soul's greatest element.⁹

In response, other inclusivists have proposed that “the best and most complete” virtue is the excellence of the whole rational element of the soul. Proponents of this *rational virtue reading* argue that it succeeds where Ackrill's fails.¹⁰ For on this reading, the disputed passage refers to the *best kind* of virtue. Such is the virtue of the rational element of the soul, which has both intellectual and nonrational (but reason-responsive) aspects, and whose excellent activity is better and more complete than the excellent activity of either the perceptive or nutritive elements. This reading of “the best and most complete” virtue has exclusionary force: it rules out the virtues of the soul's lower parts. Yet the reading is still inclusive: for rational virtue contains both intellectual and ethical virtue. Thus, the rational virtue reading allows happiness to contain more than the exercise of just one of the rational virtues (one of the intellectual virtues).

Yet this rational virtue reading faces problems of its own. In particular, if Aristotle can identify a highest virtue of the rational element of the

⁷ See Ackrill ([1974] 1980: 26–9). Proponents of this reading include Whiting (1986: 77n20) and Irwin (2012: 518). Irwin emphasizes this composite's organic structure.

⁸ See, e.g., Cooper ([1987] 1999: 222–4); Kraut (1989: 241–4); Charles (1999: 210).

⁹ In defending the composite virtue reading, Irwin (2012: 508–509) argues that Aristotle's reference to a “*teleion* life” (βίω τελεῖω) at *EN* I.7, 1098a18 is an inclusive notion, and that one therefore has reason to identify the best and most complete virtue as an inclusive composite virtue. As G. Lear (2004: 29n43) argues, however, Aristotle's reference to a “*teleion* life” need not have inclusive resonances. Aristotle could have in mind a finished life, a completed life that has reached its end.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Roche (1988c: 187) in passing and Purinton (1998) in full.

soul – a best and most complete virtue among the class of rational virtues – then Aristotle should identify happiness as activity of soul according to this *very best virtue*.¹¹ But Aristotle eventually suggests (*EN* X.7, 1177a24) that this best virtue *is* a singular kind of virtue, viz., *sophia* (contemplative wisdom). And so, Aristotle’s remarks in Book X imply that Aristotle intends to identify “the best and most complete” virtue of Book I as the highest of *all* the (rational) virtues.

Exclusivist readings, then, correctly identify “the best and most complete” virtue as one particular highest virtue. Nevertheless, if we ask what it means for activity *to accord with* this highest virtue, we will see that the function argument’s conclusion is at least consistent with an inclusive, rather than an exclusive, reading.

Like 1098a7–8, which identified the human function as “activity of soul according to (*kata*) reason or not without reason,” the function argument’s conclusion at 1098a17–18 presents an ambiguous *kata* (“according to”) + accusative construction, which is open to both *restrictive* and *directive* construals.¹² On a restrictive reading of this *kata*, some activity of soul *A* is *kata* some virtue *V* only if *A* constitutes the exercise of *V*. On a directive reading, however, *A* is *kata* *V* if *A* constitutes the exercise of *V* or if *A* is directed by the exercise of *V*. Aristotle uses *kata* *directively* in related contexts concerning how nonrational parts can accord with reason. In *EN* III.12, 1119b13–15, for instance, he insists that just as a child should “live according to the order of [his] tutor” (κατὰ τὸ πρόστιγμα τοῦ παιδαγωγοῦ ζῆν), the appetitive element should live “according to reason” (το ἐπιθυμητικὸν κατὰ τὸν λόγον). Likewise, at *EE* II 2, 1220b5–7, Aristotle insists that character (ἥθος) is an aspect of soul “according to ordering reason, capable of following reason” (κατὰ ἐπιτακτικὸν λόγον δυναμένου δ’ ἀκολουθεῖν τῷ λόγῳ ποιότης).¹³ However one parses the notion of direction here, a directive reading of *kata* allows that while the exercise of “the best and most complete” virtue may count as one mode of life-activity *kata* “the best and most complete” virtue, activity of soul *kata*

¹¹ Cf. G. Lear (2004: 45n74), in response to Purinton.

¹² Irwin (1991: 390–1) distinguishes between prescriptive and regulative senses of activity “according to” virtue. For Irwin, activity *prescriptively* according to virtue is activity that fully exercises a virtue; activity *regulatively* according to virtue is activity regulated by virtue, even if it does not fully exercise a given virtue. (Hence, to use Irwin’s example, a virtuous person’s leisurely stroll may accord with courage regulatively, even if it does not accord prescriptively.) Irwin’s distinction is similar (though not necessarily identical) to that which I draw between restrictive and directive senses of *kata*. Yet Irwin does not extend his insight to Aristotle’s remarks on activity according to “the best and most complete” virtue.

¹³ Deleting the conjectured addition at b6.

this virtue can also include the exercise of other virtues as well. Such activity can include the exercise of the other virtues to the extent that such exercise is *directed by* the exercise of “the best and most complete” virtue, a virtue with a certain authoritativeness.

Perhaps an activity counts as *kata* some virtue *V* only when it is an exercise of *V*.¹⁴ I see no reason to accept this proposal, however. For in *EN* VI.13, Aristotle apparently agrees with those who maintain that virtue is a state “according to correct reason” (κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον), and so, by extension, “according to *phronêsis*” (κατὰ τὴν φρόνησιν: 1144b23–25). Hence, all the ethical virtues (including, e.g., temperance) accord with *phronêsis*. But they are not themselves kinds or instances of *phronêsis*: indeed, it was Socrates’ mistake, Aristotle says, to identify all the virtues with *phronêsis* (1144b28–30). If so, however, temperate appetite also accords with *phronêsis* (or the exercise of *phronêsis*), even if it is not itself an exercise of *phronêsis*.

To be sure, Aristotle maintains that virtue is not only a state of soul “according to correct reason” (κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον), but one “with correct reason” (μετὰ τοῦ ὀρθοῦ λόγου), where “correct reason” is *phronêsis* (*EN* VI.13, 1144b26–28). In claiming that virtue is “with correct reason,” however, Aristotle need not retract the thought that ethical virtue directly accords with *phronêsis*. Rather, he clarifies how ethical virtue so accords. The virtuous person’s dispositions are “with correct reason” in the sense that they (unlike the dispositions of the merely enkratic agent) fully harmonize with correct reason (such that they do not conflict with correct reason’s prescriptions).¹⁵ Thus, when Aristotle maintains that virtue is a state not only “according to correct reason,” but “with correct reason,” I take Aristotle to say that virtue not only accords with correct reason, but accords *fully*.

So, to be clear, in the function argument’s conclusion, Aristotle *could* be (1) identifying the “best and most complete” virtue as one highest virtue and (2) making the further claim that happiness consists exclusively in this virtue’s exercise. One can, after all, construe activity “according to the best and most complete” virtue as simply identical to the exercise of that virtue. But if one can identify broader senses of the *kata* relation – as I just have – then one can identify correspondingly broader ways for activity of soul to accord with “the best and most complete” virtue. In other words, even if Aristotle identifies “the best and most complete” virtue with one highest virtue to the exclusion of other virtues, nothing precludes a broad range of

¹⁴ Kraut (1989: 238n31) and Lawrence (1993: 20n23, 25) reject overly broad readings of *kata*.

¹⁵ See Gottlieb (2009: 99–102).

life-activity from constituting happiness – as long as that activity accords directly with the highest virtue.¹⁶

For the record, I think that this inclusive reading of the function argument's conclusion is correct: Aristotle ultimately *does* identify happiness as activity of soul that accords – broadly and directly – with *sophia*. Aristotelian happiness, on my *accordance-inclusivist reading*, includes both contemplation and ethically virtuous action that accords with contemplation; happiness might also include external goods. I do not offer a full defense of this inclusive reading here, though I do elsewhere.¹⁷ Nor do I suggest that *all* inclusivists would accept this reading. Instead, the key point is simply that both exclusivist and inclusivist readers of Aristotle can agree on one basic claim: Aristotle's reference to "the best and most complete" virtue is neither to some composite second-order virtue, nor to the virtue of the human soul's rational part. Instead, *both* sides in principle can accept that "the best and most complete" virtue refers to one, and only one, highest virtue – the virtue of the highest "part" of the human soul.¹⁸ This virtue will turn out to be the intellectual virtue of *sophia*.

This point bears spelling out. Even if Aristotle identifies an *intellectual end* as the dominant end around which the happiest life should be organized, Aristotle need not also accept an *exclusivist* conception of happiness according to which happiness consists solely in one good. To describe an "intellectualist" or a "dominant-end" account of Aristotelian happiness as an "exclusive" account is to conflate logically separable views. Why?

(1) A dominant-end account of happiness (by definition) holds that happiness contains or is ordered toward *one* good or type of good. A dominant-end account of happiness, however, need not be intellectualist, even if Aristotle's own dominant-end conception turns out to be. One could, after all, propose a *nonintellectual* end (e.g., bodily pleasure or honor) as

¹⁶ Cf. Charles' view (1999: 212) that ethically virtuous actions can be instances of the human good if they are focally and analogically related to contemplation. Being so related to contemplation are two ways in which ethically virtuous actions might well accord with *sophia*.

¹⁷ Walker (2011). Roche (2014) argues that happiness construed principally as virtuous activity nevertheless also includes external goods. As defined here, an inclusive view holds simply that contemplation is not happiness' sole constituent.

¹⁸ The inclusivist proposal defended by Cooper ([1987] 1999: 224–227) also accepts that *sophia* is the best and most complete virtue. This proposal, however, holds that "happiness is virtuous human activity, and if there are more than one human virtue happiness is activity of all of them, including most particularly activity of the best among the virtues" (225). As Roche (1988b: 108); Heinaman (2000: 174); and Charles (1999: 210) argue, however, this reading is hard to derive from Aristotle's text. The same follows, I suggest, for Dahl's similar proposal (2011), which I discuss in Walker (2013b: 177).

the dominant end in happiness. According to *EN* I.5, both hedonists like Sardanapallus and honor-loving politicians err in their respective choices of nonintellectual ends.

(2) A dominant-end account of happiness need not accept exclusivism. For one can hold both that (a) happiness contains more than one sort of good and that (b) one of these component goods is the highest, or most complete, end *within* happiness. Move (a) commits one to inclusivism about happiness. Move (b) commits one to the view that happiness has a dominant end. Thus, in principle, an inclusive account of happiness can identify happiness as a complex organization of various kinds of goods or activities, yet still insist that one good within this complex both dominates and best characterizes the whole complex. These distinctions thus allow for the possibility of an intellectualist dominant-end account of happiness that is simultaneously inclusive. In his own inclusive reading of Aristotle on happiness, Ackrill presents just this possibility: “By a ‘dominant end’ might be meant a *monolithic* end, an end consisting of just one valued activity or good, or there might be meant that element in an end combining two or more independently valued goods which has a dominant or preponderating or paramount importance.”¹⁹ While many readers of Aristotle have opted for the former option, one must not forget the latter. One way of specifying the latter option is to view *sophia*’s exercise as the dominant end within a complex of virtuous activities of soul, and to view happiness as activity of soul directly in accord with the best and most complete virtue.²⁰

Since scholars have used the term “inclusivism” in multiple ways in various debates, I offer the following range of possible positions:

- (i) *Broad, nonordered inclusivism*: the ultimate end consists in ethically and intellectually virtuous activities of the rational soul, along with other goods choiceworthy for themselves, with no teleological ordering among these goods.

¹⁹ Ackrill ([1974] 1980: 17). For clarity, consider the account of Aristotelian happiness articulated by Charles (1999: 223n11): “My suggestion is not a form of ‘inclusivism’, if (so understood) Aristotle merely lists some goods, all or most of which are (in his view) *constituents* of the good life. For my Aristotle (unlike this inclusivist cousin) can *justify* including some things on this list (and excluding others) because they are analogous to intellectual contemplation.” On my view, Charles’ proposal is a version of inclusivism, for it makes move (a): it maintains that happiness includes more than one monistic good. Yet Charles’ proposal differs from simple (i.e., broad, nonordered) forms of inclusivism, for it also makes move (b): it identifies contemplation as (somehow) a dominant end.

²⁰ On the conceptual inadequacy of the inclusive-end/dominant-end dichotomy as usually construed, see Clark (1975: 156); Hardie (1979: 41–42); Roche (1988b); and Gerson (2005: 258–259).

- (2) *Broad, ordered inclusivism*: the ultimate end consists in ethically and intellectually virtuous activities of the rational soul, as well as other goods choiceworthy for themselves, and these goods are teleologically ordered.
- (3) *Narrow, nonordered inclusivism (a.k.a. broad virtue-inclusivism)*: the ultimate end consists solely in all ethically and intellectually virtuous activities of the rational soul, teleologically unordered.
- (4) *Narrow, ordered inclusivism (a.k.a. narrow virtue-inclusivism)*: the ultimate end consists solely in all ethically and intellectually virtuous activities of the rational soul, teleologically ordered.
- (5) *Exclusivism (a.k.a. strict intellectualism)*: the ultimate end consists solely in the highest intellectually virtuous activity of the rational soul, viz., contemplation.²¹

Given this taxonomy, proponents of the exclusivist position (5) should be open to my arguments. The same holds, to greater and lesser degrees, for proponents of inclusivist positions (2)–(4). Inclusivist position (1) gains some minimal support from Aristotle’s popularizing, and nonordered, sketch of happiness in *Rhetoric* I.5. Yet for reasons I have suggested, broad, nonordered inclusivism is a nonstarter as a serious reading of the *Nicomachean* account of happiness.

I believe that the most defensible inclusivist position would be either a narrow, ordered inclusivism or a certain kind of broad ordered inclusivism (i.e., either position [4] or some version of position [2] that allows for a teleological ordering of ethical and intellectual virtues). Nevertheless, some inclusivists may persist in accepting either the composite virtue or rational virtue readings of Aristotle’s reference to “the best and most complete” virtue in *EN* I.7. These readings of *EN* I.7 naturally hang together with inclusivist positions (2) and (3). Yet those who accept the composite virtue or rational virtue readings of *EN* I.7’s function argument can accept, in principle, that Aristotle ultimately identifies *sophia* as the best of the many singular virtues. In fact, as I argue, Aristotle offers reasons for identifying *sophia* as the most complete singular virtue as early as *EN* VI. Suppose that one accepts inclusivism about happiness on the basis of either the composite virtue or rational virtue reading of the function argument. Even then, one can still accept that a particular kind of virtuous activity – the exercise of *sophia* – promises to play some key role in

²¹ I thank Eric Brown for this taxonomy. One can develop finer-grained versions of these various theses. “Virtue-inclusivism” appears in Purinton (1998: 264n14). “Strict intellectualism” is from Keyt ([1978] 1983).

happiness. Therefore, the composite virtue or rational virtue inclusivist reader of *EN* I.7 can accept (in principle) that *sophia*'s exercise will have a certain ultimacy within happiness. So, even those who accept the composite virtue or rational virtue readings of *EN* I.7 can, in principle, still accept position (4).²²

2.3 *Sophia* as the Highest Virtue in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI

EN I.7 and I.13 divide the rational "part" of the soul into (1) an authoritatively rational thinking element, and (2) a nonrational, but reason-responsive, desiderative element that obeys, listens to, or shares in reason. *EN* II–V examine the virtues of the latter element, the ethical virtues of courage (ἀνδρεία: III.6–9) and temperance (σωφροσύνη: III.10–12); liberality (ἐλευθεριότης: IV.1) and magnificence (μεγαλοπρέπεια: IV.2); magnanimity (μεγαλοψυχία: IV.3) and unnamed proper ambition (IV.4); various social virtues (IV.5–9); and justice (δικαιοσύνη: V.1–9) and equity (ἐπιεικεία: V.10–11). The virtues of the former element include the intellectual virtues, which *EN* VI examines. For now, notice that even by the end of *EN* I, Aristotle provides reason to doubt that *any* ethical virtue could be the best and most complete virtue. For the ethical virtues are excellences of a nonrational, but reason-responsive, element that merely *obeys* or *listens to* the authoritatively rational element. Therefore, the virtues of the latter would possess greater authority and completeness than the former.²³

Aristotle examines the authoritatively rational "part" more carefully in *EN* VI.1 (= *EE* V.1), 1139a3–15 (cf. *MM* I.34, 1196b12ff). Referring to his earlier distinction of the rational and nonrational "parts of the soul" (μέρη τῆς ψυχῆς), Aristotle divides the authoritatively rational element into two subsectors. The first is an "understanding" or "scientific" element (the ἐπιστημονικόν); the second is a "calculating" element (the λογιστικόν). The former element, Aristotle says, concerns the principles of things that do not admit of being otherwise; the latter concerns things that do (1139a6–8). Given their respective different objects, these two "portions of the soul" (τῶν τῆς ψυχῆς μορίων) differ in kind (1139a8–11). Aristotle sets out his goal in *EN* VI as determining the best state (ἡ βελτίστη ἔξις) of the scientific and calculative elements, respectively (1139a16–17). Such

²² In *EE* II.1, Aristotle identifies happiness as the complete exercise of complete (i.e., total) virtue. Yet in *EE* V.13 (= *EN* VI.13), Aristotle identifies *sophia* as more authoritative than *phronēsis*. So, the *EE* allows for a hierarchy of component virtues within total virtue.

²³ Grönroos (2007) argues that the reason-responsive element shares in reason by relying on reason as an authority.

excellences would be those in virtue of which these two elements would fulfill their respective functions of attaining truth (*EN* VI.2, 1139b12–13).

After surveying other intellectual virtues, Aristotle proposes that *phronêsis* (practical wisdom) is the virtue of the part of the soul that has belief (δόξα), whose objects admit of being otherwise (*EN* VI.5, 1140b25–30; cf. *MM* I.34, 1197a1–2). So, the calculative element, distinguished by its capacity for practical rationality, has *phronêsis* as its ruling virtue. By implication, *sophia* (contemplative wisdom) is the proper virtue of the other part, the scientific element distinguished by its capacity for theoretical rationality (*EN* VI.11, 1143b14–17; VI.12, 1143b33–1144a3). Aristotle is clearer about the contemplative nature of the scientific element in *Politics* VII.14. After following *EN* I.13 in partitioning the soul into rational and irrational “parts” (μέρη), Aristotle divides the rational “part” into a practical (πρακτικός) and a contemplative (θεωρητικός) element (1333a16–25).

On this basis, then, I refer to the scientific element as “contemplative *nous*” (intellect). Although Aristotle sometimes refers to *nous* as a virtue that comprehends first principles (*EN* VI.6), I refer here, as Aristotle sometimes does, to contemplative *nous* as a capacity (e.g., *DA* III.9, 432b27). Likewise, I refer to the practical element as “practical *nous*.”²⁴ Finally, I describe the exercise of contemplative *nous* (restrictively) in accord with the virtue of *sophia* as the paradigm instance of what *EN* X later calls contemplation (*theôria*).

I say more about contemplation’s objects in due course. To respond, however, to one immediate potential confusion: *EN* VI.1 claims that “we contemplate” (θεωροῦμεν) things whose principles do not admit of change with the scientific element, and “contemplate” things whose principles do admit of change (τὰ ἐνδεχόμενα) with the calculative element (1139a6–8).²⁵ Here, Aristotle might seem immediately to prevent one from identifying contemplation paradigmatically as contemplation of the unchanging. Yet only a few lines later, Aristotle explicitly distinguishes thinking concerned with action from “contemplative and nonpractical thinking” (θεωρητικῆς διανοίας καὶ μὴ πρακτικῆς; 1139a26–31). Hence, when referring to the

²⁴ In *EN* IX.4, 1166a22–23 and IX.8, 1168b34–1169a3, Aristotle seems to indicate that *nous* as a general power is authoritative in the soul. And, as I discuss in Section 7.5, the *Protrepticus* might seem not to make strong distinctions between contemplative and practical *nous*. Hence, Aristotle (sometimes) speaks about *nous* as a general power (cf. *DA* III.4, 429a10–11, a23). Nevertheless, Aristotle also distinguishes practical and theoretical *nous* as different in kind (τῷ γένει), and he counts these kinds of *nous* as distinct parts (or powers) of the soul. This tendency is strongest at *EN* VI.1, 1139a8–11 and *Politics* VII.14, 1333a16–25. Therefore, I do not read Aristotle as committed only to the existence of *nous* as a general power with practical and theoretical applications. Instead, I take Aristotle, ultimately, to make strong distinctions between the contemplative and practical intellects.

²⁵ For similar uses of θεωρεῖν, see *EN* VI.4, 1140a11; VI.5, 1140b8–10; VI.7, 1141a25.

practical contemplation of the calculative element in 1139a6–8, Aristotle uses the verb θεωρεῖν in a looser sense than he does in 1139a26–31, and in those passages of *EN* X.7–8 (especially 1177a19–22 and 1178b20–22) according to which contemplation constitutes our “complete happiness.”²⁶

Having distinguished between practical and contemplative *nous* in *EN* VI.1, Aristotle concludes *EN* VI by arguing that the former element (and its virtue of *phronêsis*) is for the sake of the latter element (and its virtue of *sophia*). He explicitly subordinates *phronêsis* to *sophia*: “[I]t would seem to be out of place (ἄτοπον) if [*phronêsis*], inferior to *sophia*, will be more authoritative (κυριωτέρᾳ)” (*EN* VI.12, 1143b33–34). *Phronêsis*, Aristotle contends, “is authoritative (κυρία) over neither *sophia* nor the better portion” of the soul (1145a6–7). Thus, the relation between *phronêsis* and *sophia* parallels that between medical science and health: just as medicine seeks to attain the higher end of health, so too *phronêsis* seeks to secure the higher end of *sophia*’s exercise (1145a6–11). Articulating this point, *MM* I.34, 1198b13–20 compares the relation between *phronêsis* and *sophia* to that between a steward and a lord in a household. Although the steward has control over the household, he is ultimately not master over the lord. Instead, the steward takes care of household business in service to the lord, so that the lord may exercise leisure.

In arguing that *sophia* is more authoritative than *phronêsis*, Aristotle seems to contradict his earlier claim for political science’s supreme authoritativeness (at *EN* I.2, 1094a26–28). The tension, however, is more apparent than real. First, at the opening of the *Nicomachean Ethics* – where Aristotle provides an orientation for his audience – Aristotle simply reports the *endoxon* that political science “appears” (φαίνεται) to be the most authoritative science (1094a27–28). Aristotle need not commit himself to this claim full stop.²⁷ Second, while *EN* VI.13 shows that the earlier claim about political science cannot be correct without qualification, the claim could still be true with qualification. *Within* the realm of human affairs, perhaps, political science is supremely authoritative: it proximately regulates the whole range of action within a community. Yet political science, as a kind of *phronêsis*, is ultimately subordinate to *sophia*.²⁸

By *EN* VI’s conclusion, then, Aristotle offers a finer-grained account of the human soul’s thinking element. This account identifies contemplative *nous* as the soul’s most authoritative function, and *sophia* as the most

²⁶ On θεωρεῖν in Aristotle, see Roochnik (2009). Practical contemplation exercises a different power of soul from theoretical contemplation; and the former’s objects differ from the latter. To this extent, I find Aristotle’s uses of θεωρεῖν more discontinuous than Roochnik does.

²⁷ Cf. M. Johnson (2015: 170). ²⁸ Cf. Gerson (2005: 252n53).

authoritative virtue. In these ways, Aristotle implicitly identifies *sophia* as either “the best and most complete” virtue, or – if one persists in upholding the composite virtue or rational virtue reading – as at least the *most complete* among the rational part’s singular virtues. But in what, for Aristotle, does the activity of contemplative *nous* according to *sophia* consist?

2.4 The Nature and Objects of *Sophia* and Contemplation

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle introduces the virtue of *sophia* as “scientific understanding and comprehension of the things most honorable by nature” (ἐπιστήμη καὶ νοῦς τῶν τιμιωτάτων τῇ φύσει: *EN* VI.7, 1141b2–3). Such things, he says, are “much more divine by nature” than the human being (1141a34–1141b1). Aristotle also appeals to popular beliefs about the wise person (or the *sophos*) to characterize such *sophia*. Those who possess *sophia* “know things that are extraordinary and wonderful and difficult and divine, but useless (ἄχρηστα δ’)” (1141b6–7).

On this sketch, *sophia* combines (1) scientific understanding (or ἐπιστήμη) and (2) comprehension (or νοῦς in the aretaic sense). *Sophia*, then, is a kind of complete scientific understanding (1141a19–20). By exercising *sophia*, one not only grasps why certain things are necessarily so, but one also comprehends the first principles from which such understanding proceeds (1141a17–18). Yet in possessing *sophia*, one grasps especially comprehensive first principles. *Sophia*, after all, has the divine for its proper object. *Qua sophos*, one comprehensively understands the cosmic order by grasping its divine first principles. And in virtue of *sophia*’s divine objects, the exercise of such understanding – contemplation – somehow lacks practical utility.

Metaphysics A.1 fills in this sketch.²⁹ Aristotle begins the *Metaphysics*’ account of *sophia* by distinguishing between experience (ἐμπειρία) and art (τέχνη). Someone with art knows the universal and the cause, while the experienced agent knows only individuals and lacks deeper knowledge. “For the experienced know the ‘that’ (τὸ ὅτι μὲν ἴσασι), but do not know ‘why’ (διότι δ’ οὐκ ἴσασιν); but the [artisans] know (γινώριζουσιν) the ‘why’ and the cause” (981a28–30; cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 465a). Since Aristotle thinks that we believe artisans are wiser – more *sophos* – than the merely experienced, we think “what is called *sophia* [to be] about the first causes and principles” (981b27–29; 982a1–2; cf. *EN* VI.7, 1141a17–19).

²⁹ On *sophia* and contemplation in these works, see Owens (1962: 157–173) and (1987); Defourny (1978); Kraut (1989: 73–76); Nightingale (2004: ch. 5, esp. 235–240); and Roochnik (2009).

On this basis, *Metaphysics* A.2 articulates common assumptions (ὑπολήψεις: 982a20) about the *sophos*. (1) We believe the wise man to know the whole, i.e., to understand “all things as [far as that] admits [of possibility], [but] not having understanding (ἐπιστήμη) of each of them” (982a8–10; cf. *EN* VI.7, 1141a13–15). (2) He knows matters difficult for human beings to know (982a10–11). (3) He has exact knowledge and can explain causes (982a12–14). (4) He possesses a knowledge that is most choiceworthy for its own sake and for the sheer joy of knowing (982a14–16). (5) He is sovereign: “For the wise man should not be ordered (οὐ γὰρ δεῖν ἐπιτάττεσθαι), but [should] order (ἐπιτάττειν), and not obey (πεῖθεσθαι) another, but the less wise [should obey]” (982a17–19).

Aristotle thinks that one who understands a “most universal” science will possess just these features of the wise man. (1*) The most universal science in some way knows the whole: “it is necessary for the understanding of all things (πάντα ἐπίστασθαι) to belong to the one most having the understanding of the universal (τὴν καθόλου ἐπιστήμην); for this one knows (οἶδε), somehow, all the things underlying [it]” (982a21–22). (2*) What is universal is not to be known through simple sense perception. Indeed, what is universal seems most difficult to know, and so the most universal science knows the most difficult things (982a23–25). (3*) The most universal science is most exact since it deals most with first principles (982a25–26; cf. *EN* VI.7, 1141a16–17). Since this science has fewer principles with which to contend, it has correspondingly less room for error. Hence, it is most able to explain (982a26–29). (4*) This science, which treats of what is most knowable, is most choiceworthy for its own sake. It constitutes knowledge that we seek for no other end than for putting our epistemic powers to work (982a30–b4). (5*) The most universal science is most sovereign: it knows “that for the sake of which each thing is to be done” (τίνος ἕνεκέν ἐστι πρακτέον ἕκαστον: 982b4–6).

Since understanding such a science would make one wise, *sophia* must be such a universal science. *Sophia*, then, must “be contemplative of the first principles and causes (τῶν πρώτων ἀρχῶν καὶ αἰτιῶν εἶναι θεωρητικήν); for the good and the that-for-the-sake-of-which is one of the causes” (982b9–10). *Sophia*, unlike the practical sciences, does not focus on whatever contingent features of reality can provide benefits. Nevertheless, *sophia* has its eye on the good (cf. *Metaphysics* B.2, 996b12–14). More specifically, *sophia* considers the good that serves as a final cause for all things, i.e., the good for the sake of which the whole of nature exists.

An obscure passage, *Metaphysics* Λ.10, 1075a11–19, considers just how the whole cosmos is ordered for the sake of the good. On Aristotle’s view, the good

of the cosmos is *both* immanent to the order of the cosmos *and* “something separate and itself in itself” (κεχωρισμένον τι καὶ αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτό: α12–13). Aristotle has in mind two kinds of good. The immanent good₁ for the sake of which the whole exists is *internal* to the good ordering of the whole, just as the good₁ of an army (i.e., its fighting ability) is internal to the army (i.e., as the smooth and effective functional organization of its platoons and divisions). Both the good₁ of the whole and the good₁ of the army simply *consist in* their being a well-ordered whole and a well-ordered army. The separate good₂, by contrast, is somehow independent of the whole, just as the general of an army is somehow independent of those whom he orders. The good₂’s independence is hard to understand, for a general nevertheless remains a functionally defined part of the army. Perhaps Aristotle thinks that the good₂ of the whole is independent by virtue of its privileged status as a *primary principle of order* within that whole, just as the general is a primary principle of order within the army. That is, the good₂ confers order on the other (subordinate) elements of the whole of which it, too, is a part. But the good₂ is independent in the minimal sense of not *being subject to* those subordinate elements – no more than the general is subject to those whom he orders.

The whole, in other words, has its immanent order (i.e., its good₁) just by virtue of being ordered for the sake of the whole’s primary principle of order (i.e., for the good₂). By virtue of being ordered toward that primary principle of order, the parts of the whole – like the parts of the army – function well together. Such a good₂ – a good by reference to which one could both (1) explain the functioning well of the whole and (2) understand all the things that constitute that whole – would have the status of a *supreme good*.³⁰

According to Aristotle, god, the unmoved Prime Mover, is the cosmos’ supreme good: “On such a principle, then, depends the heaven and nature” (*Metaphysics* Λ.7, 1072b13–14). Nature depends on such a supreme good insofar as the Prime Mover is an object of love and imitation for beings within the cosmos. The Prime Mover thereby sustains motion in the cosmos.³¹ Hence, *sophia*, as a science of the supreme good₂ that orders the cosmos (and that is responsible for the cosmos’ good₁), is a *theology*:

³⁰ The good₂ of the cosmos exists separately from the whole that it orders in a way stronger than the general exists separately from the army. The general (the army’s good₂) depends on the other parts of the army, whereas the good₂ of the cosmos – *qua* indestructible and wholly self-sufficient – depends on nothing else at all. Further, whereas the good₂ orders the cosmos just as an object of love, the general issues orders. I take these features to be expected limitations of Aristotle’s analogy, on the obscurity of which M. Johnson (2005: 274–276) remarks. I say more on these issues in Section 4.3.

³¹ On the Prime Mover as final cause, see Kahn (1985). Although I make the traditional assumption that Aristotle identifies the Prime Mover as god, it is not immune to criticism: see, e.g., Bodéüs (2000). In response, however, see Madigan (2001).

[*Sophia*] alone would be most divine in two ways. For the [science] god most of all would have is divine among sciences, if any [science] were of the divine; and this [science] alone has both of these [features]; for god is thought to be among the causes for all things and a certain principle, and such [a science] god would have either alone or most of all. (A.2, 983a5–10)

Sophia is the most divine science both subjectively and objectively. Subjectively, *sophia* is the sort of science that god as a knower would possess. Objectively, *sophia*'s proper object of study *is* god, the final cause of the whole.

As Aristotle describes it, contemplation consists not in pursuing knowledge, or becoming wise, but in *beholding* what one has come to know (cf. *DA* II.5, 417a21–b2; *EN* X.7, 1177a26–27). Aristotle allows that philosophical activity, broadly construed, can contemplate all sorts of objects. For instance, natural philosophers contemplate the physiology of animal bodies and understand the final causes of their parts. Such contemplation has its compensating attractions “with respect to the philosophy about divine matters” (πρὸς τὴν περὶ τὰ θεῖα φιλοσοφίαν), for one can more easily understand the order of an animal body than the order of the cosmos (*PA* I.5, 645a4). Moreover, what Aristotle calls “the philosophy of human affairs” (ἡ περὶ τὰ ἀνθρώπεια φιλοσοφία: *EN* X.9, 1181b15) contemplates the nature and workings of the good city. But Aristotle restricts the paradigmatic objects of the most perfect contemplation. Thus, the objects of “the most honorable” sort of philosophical activity, the objects that we understand in exercising *sophia*, are *divine* objects (*Metaphysics* E.1, 1026a17–22). Such a “theological” (θεολογική: 1026a19) philosophy, Aristotle says, is superior to even such “contemplative” sciences as mathematics or natural science (1026a22–23). So, according to Aristotle, the best sort of contemplation in which human beings can engage, the exercise of contemplative *nous* according to *sophia*, consists in actively *understanding* the cosmos by reference to the cosmos' unmoved Prime Mover, the eternally self-thinking god. Such contemplation, in turn, approximates the Prime Mover's own eternally active self-contemplation.³²

To put these claims into sharper focus, I briefly consider the contemplation to which Aristotle exhorts his audience in fragments of his lost *Protrepticus*. Since the *Protrepticus* plays an important role in my overall interpretation of Aristotle, I sketch the picture of contemplation that Aristotle suggests in these fragments. This picture, I contend, is broadly

³² Generally following Kraut (1989: 73–76).

continuous with the picture that Aristotle provides in his other works. (I say more about the *Protrepticus* and its status, however, in [Chapter 7](#).)

In *Protrepticus* 9, Aristotle appeals to the reputable views of Pythagoras and Anaxagoras concerning the end for the sake of which human beings exist. Aristotle quotes Pythagoras as saying that this end is “to contemplate the heavens” (51.8–9/B18); similarly, he quotes Anaxagoras’ claim that human beings live “to contemplate the heavens and stars and moon and sun” (51.13–15/B19). Thus, Aristotle thinks, we should turn to “the contemplation of the universe” (τὴν θεωρίαν τοῦ παντός: 53.25/B44). Although Aristotle believes that contemplation’s proper object (or objects) is an issue to address more fully at a later point, he adds that he has provided sufficient information for a preliminary discussion (52.8–11/B20). The *Protrepticus*, then, initially presents “contemplation” as a certain sort of speculative cosmology, with celestial phenomena serving, to some extent, as its proper objects.³³

But what does Aristotle expect “the contemplation of the universe” to include? A passage from *EE* I.5 that parallels *Protrepticus* 51.13–15/B19 again approvingly quotes Anaxagoras’ claim that human beings live for “the contemplation of the heavens and the order of the whole cosmos” (τοῦ . . . θεωρῆσαι τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν περὶ τὸν ὅλον κόσμον τάξιν: 1216a13–14). Later, however, Aristotle highlights the contemplation of *god* (τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ θεωρίαν: *EE* VIII.3, 1249b17; 20–21).³⁴ To reconcile these apparently different accounts of the end of human beings, recall that Anaxagoras holds that a separate and eternal intellect (νοῦς) is the source of order and motion in the cosmos (DK59B12–14). Recall, further, that Aristotle praises Anaxagoras for this view: “when someone [viz., Anaxagoras] said intellect to be present, just as in living things, also in nature as the cause of the cosmos and of the entire order (τὸν αἴτιον τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τῆς τάξεως πάσης), he seemed like one of the sober in comparison with those earlier speaking at random” (*Metaphysics* A.3, 984b15–18; cf. *Physics* VIII.5, 256b24–27). Aristotle most fully appropriates Anaxagoras’ view in *Metaphysics* Λ, which maintains that god’s intellectual activity (νόησις) plays the role of cosmic ordering principle and inspires motion as an unmoved object of love. Hence, when the Aristotle of the *Eudemian Ethics* agrees with Anaxagoras that “the contemplation of the heavens and the whole order of the cosmos” is the goal of human life, but goes on to identify this goal with “the contemplation of god,” Aristotle may

³³ I owe this suggestion to D.S. Hutchinson.

³⁴ With the manuscripts, I retain θεοῦ in b17 and θεὸν in b20. Against the OCT’s emendations, see Kenny (1992: 99n26).

well think that the latter sort of contemplation constitutes part of, and completes, the former.

The thought that contemplating the universe includes contemplating god (construed as a divine intellect) has a Platonic pedigree. In the cosmology of the *Timaeus*, for instance, understanding the cosmic order requires us to refer to the Demiurge, which Timaeus identifies as god (e.g., at 30a2; 30b8; 30d3). Further, Timaeus claims that the Demiurge wishes all things to resemble himself as much as possible (29e), and that the Demiurge wishes the cosmic order to possess intellect (30b). But if the cosmic order, in possessing intellect, mirrors the Demiurge, then the Demiurge too will be a kind of intellect.

The *Protrepticus* need not agree point for point with Pythagorean, Anaxagorean, or Platonic views. Nor must the *Protrepticus* endorse all the details of *Metaphysics* Λ's theology. Nevertheless, what the *Protrepticus* calls "the contemplation of the universe" will include, and will be somehow completed by, the contemplation of a certain intellect (or intellectual activity) as a cosmic ordering principle. Moreover, in the *Protrepticus*, as elsewhere, Aristotle identifies this intellect as a god. Indeed, the *Protrepticus* explicitly identifies god and intellect (8, 48.9–13/B108; 48.16–17/B110).³⁵

In these ways, the *Protrepticus* coheres with *Metaphysics* E.1, 1026a19–23, which allows that natural science and mathematics constitute kinds of philosophy. Yet in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle ultimately identifies first philosophy as the primary, and most perfect, mode of philosophy. As in the *Metaphysics*, so in the *Protrepticus*, Aristotle centrally focuses on first philosophy. Such philosophy includes theology, insofar as god is a first principle and final cause of the cosmos, and insofar as all being, as *energeia* (activity, or being-at-work), turns out to be comprehensible in terms of god's perfect, eternal *energeia*. Accordingly, the *Protrepticus* grants pride of place – and aims to defend most of all – first philosophy conceived as distinct from natural science.³⁶

³⁵ See also *Protrepticus* 5, 35.14–18/B28, if it is indeed authentically Aristotelian. In *Against the Mathematicians* 9.20–23 (fr. 10, Rose, 3rd edn.), Sextus Empiricus reports Aristotle's views on the origin of belief in the gods, and suggests that, for Aristotle, the search for comprehensive understanding about celestial phenomena naturally leads us to consider god. God's role as source of cosmic order also receives detailed discussion in the pseudo-Aristotelian *De Mundo* VI–VII.

³⁶ M. Frede's remarks (2008: 515) on *Metaphysics* A.1–2 also pertain to the *Protrepticus*: Aristotle offers "an introduction, and protreptic, to philosophy in general, but at the same time an introduction to metaphysics, because what philosophy primarily is is metaphysics . . . [T]his is an introduction to philosophy which, in the face of considerable opposition, tries to emphasize the theoretical character of philosophy, and which cannot afford, without losing much of the audience immediately, to insist not only that philosophy is theoretical, rather than practical or productive, but in the first instance concerned with a nonphysical realm of entities like God."

I do not address whether the *Protrepticus*' conception of wisdom is identical to the conception(s) Aristotle develops elsewhere. Still, the *Protrepticus*' conception of wisdom – whether the *Protrepticus* calls it *sophia* or *phronêsis* – is continuous with the *sophia* Aristotle describes in other works.³⁷ For wisdom in the *Protrepticus* – whether labeled as *sophia* or *phronêsis* – possesses all the features that Aristotle attributes to *sophia* in *Metaphysics* A.2. (1) Wisdom understands the nature of the whole.³⁸ (2) Wisdom concerns objects not graspable through perception.³⁹ (3) Wisdom possesses superlative exactness or precision (ἀκριβεία),⁴⁰ deals with first principles and causes, and is, therefore, most explanatory.⁴¹ (4) As a science, wisdom is most choiceworthy for its own sake and (in that sense) useless.⁴² (5) Wisdom is the most authoritative kind of understanding, insofar as it grasps the good, including the highest good – the divine.⁴³

2.5 Contemplation, Uselessness, and Leisureliness

I now return to *EN* VI.13, which describes *sophia* as superior to *phronêsis* and, by extension, the other intellectual and ethical virtues. Hence, Aristotle apparently identifies *sophia* as the most authoritative of singular virtues. In *EN* X.7–8, Aristotle builds on this point and concludes the task

I note that, for Pythagoreans and Anaxagoreans, numbers and celestial bodies – natural objects – are all that we should contemplate. In response, Aristotle questions “whether the cosmos or some other nature” is the proper object of the most authoritative science (*Protrepticus* 9, 52.9–11/B20). In saying this, Aristotle evidently thinks that some nature will still be contemplation's paradigmatic object. Here, I take it, Aristotle is using “nature” in a broad sense, i.e., as referring to a kind of being. Thus, theology has a certain nature as its proper object, viz., divine being, which is immutable and independent from matter. But such a divine nature is not an object of natural science, which is concerned with what is subject to change and enmattered (*Metaphysics* E.1, 1025b26–28; 1026a10–16). (I thank Monte Ransome Johnson for a question on this matter.)

³⁷ Other Aristotelian works, however, also describe *sophia* as a kind of *phronêsis*, where *phronêsis* is a kind of wisdom (*Metaphysics* A.2, 982b24; *EN* I.6, 1096b24; *EE* I.1, 1214a31–b6; I.4, 1215a34–b5; I.5, 1216a19–20). On the *Protrepticus* and *Metaphysics* A.1–2, see Jaeger (1962: 68–71); Cambiano (2012: 39–42); Seggiaro (2012); and Wareh (2012: 47–49). Düring (1961: 238) suggests that these works were written around the same period. I take no position on this matter.

³⁸ *Protrepticus* 9, 53.25/B44; cf. *Metaphysics* A.2, 982a21–22.

³⁹ *Protrepticus* 6, 38.14–22/B34; 7, 44.17–26/B76–77; cf. *Metaphysics* A.2, 982a23–25.

⁴⁰ *Protrepticus* 6, 40.15–20/B55; 7, 42.13–23/B65; 10, 55.7–14/B48; 11, 58.8–9/B85; cf. *De Communi Mathematica Scientia* [DCMS] 23, 72.8–73.3; 26, 83.6–7.

⁴¹ *Protrepticus* 6, 38.22–39.4/B35, overlapping with DCMS 26, 81.20–24; cf. *Metaphysics* A.2, 982a25–26; b9–10.

⁴² *Protrepticus* 7, 43.12–20/B68–69; 7, 44.24–25/B77; 9, 53.15–26/B44; cf. 9, 51.8–15/B18–19; 9, 51.16–52.5/B17; DCMS 23, 70.26–71.4; cf. *Metaphysics* A.2, 982a14–16.

⁴³ *Protrepticus* 6, 37.16–22/B9; cf. 6, 39.16–40.1/B39; 10, 55.14–23/B49; 55.26–56.2/B50; DCMS 23, 72.8–73.3; cf. *Metaphysics* A.2, 982b4–7; b9–10f; 983a5–11.

begun in *EN* I.5. He explicitly identifies the happiest life as the contemplative life (*EN* X.7, 1178a6–8).

In defending this claim about the happiest life, Aristotle reiterates, but extends, claims already made in *EN* I.7. Happiness is not just activity “according to virtue” (κατ’ ἀρετήν), but rather, activity “according to the greatest” virtue (κατὰ τὴν κρατίστην: *EN* X.7, 1177a13). Thus, Aristotle identifies our “complete happiness” (τελεία εὐδαιμονία) as the exercise of our “best” power (τοῦ ἀρίστου: 1177a13) – contemplative *nous* (1177a13–14) – according to its proper virtue (κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν ἀρετήν: 1177a17). Our complete happiness, he claims, is a “contemplative” (θεωρητική: 1177a18) activity, one “according to *sophia*” (κατὰ τὴν σοφίαν: 1177a24). Aristotle uses the *kata* restrictively in these passages: our complete happiness, as the activity of contemplative *nous* according to its *proper* virtue of *sophia*, is simply the *exercise* of *sophia* (1177a20–21; a32–34).

So, when Aristotle says that the exercise of *sophia* constitutes “complete happiness,” he construes such happiness as the sort of contemplation outlined in the [last section](#). In what sense, however, is contemplation our “complete happiness”? Aristotle could mean (1) that our happiness consists *exclusively* in such contemplation, since of all the human functions Aristotle considers, contemplation most completely fulfills the criteria that happiness as such should meet. Or, he could mean (2) that contemplation is the most complete of *the many* virtuous activities that compose our happiness. On reading (2), happiness includes other activities. Yet contemplation, as the exercise of “the best and most complete” virtue, would still be the most choiceworthy *element* of our happiness.⁴⁴ On reading (2), Aristotle highlights contemplation’s ultimacy relative to other singular goods or kinds of virtuous activity – even if contemplation lacks ultimacy without qualification.

Once again, I sidestep giving either an exclusive or inclusive reading of these lines. For both sides of the debate can agree on the following three points: (1) In *EN* X.7–8, Aristotle identifies the power to contemplate as the most complete of the various functions that compose the human soul.⁴⁵ (2) Aristotle identifies excellent contemplation as the highest activity that we can pursue *within* a life. So, bracketing the issue of whether happiness contains more than one *kind* of virtuous activity, both sides can agree that Aristotle identifies such contemplation as *somehow* the ultimate, or most

⁴⁴ On *teleia eudaimonia*, see Keyt ([1978] 1983: 377) and Gauthier and Jolif (2002: 862) (though one need not identify the most choiceworthy element of happiness as itself a *bios*).

⁴⁵ Some deny that contemplative *nous* is part of the human soul. See [Chapter 5](#).

complete, end for human beings. For exclusivists, the exercise of *sophia* is a most complete end *absolutely speaking* or *without qualification*, so that happiness just is the exercise of *sophia*. For inclusivists, the exercise of *sophia* is at best “most complete” in a more modest *relative* and *qualified* sense. Something is “most complete” in this latter sense when it is simply more complete than any other activity *within* the system of virtuous activities constituting happiness.⁴⁶ The whole system itself, however, would stand to be most complete absolutely and without qualification. (3) One can live according to the lesser virtues of lower life-functions. On Aristotle’s view, however, leading the happiest life requires one to strive, as far as possible, “to live according to the greatest of the things in him” (ζῆν κατὰ τὸ κράτιστον τῶν ἐν αὐτῷ: 1177b34). For Aristotle, then, “the life according to intellect” (ὁ κατὰ τὸν νοῦν βίος: 1178a6–7) is happiest.

Some points of clarification about the contemplative life (the *theôrêtikos bios*): where *X* is the dominant end of a *bios*, an *X-ikos bios* need not consist just in *X*. Nor should one think that when Aristotle compares an *X-ikos bios* and a *Y-ikos bios*, he is comparing that *part* of someone’s life spent in *X* with that *part* of someone’s life spent in *Y*. Rather, an *X-ikos bios* would be a whole form of life organized around *X*, just as a *Y-ikos bios* would be a whole form of life organized around *Y*. Thus, a *theôrêtikos bios* would not be the part of, say, Anaxagoras’ life that Anaxagoras spent contemplating. Instead, a *theôrêtikos bios* would be the whole kind of life that Anaxagoras led, namely, one organized around contemplation.⁴⁷ Further, in identifying contemplation as, in some sense, the happiest life’s ultimate end, Aristotle need not accept any crude conception of practical reasoning that construes contemplation as a maximand. On the contrary, Aristotle can identify contemplation *qua* end in other ways, e.g., as an object of approximation, or as an organizing, regulative, delimiting aim.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ On absolute and relative construals of superlative completeness, see Walker (2011: 106–107).

⁴⁷ See Cooper ([1987] 1999: 229n14) (against Keyt [(1978) 1983]); Nussbaum (1995: 115–116); and Natali (2001: 135–138). Cf. Plato’s use of *bios* in the parallel comparison of lives in *Republic* IX.580d–581d (esp. 581c9) and *Philebus* 20eff. In Walker (2017), I examine Aristotle’s conception of the *theôrêtikos bios* in more detail. On *bios* in Aristotle generally, see Lennox (2010).

⁴⁸ On contemplation *qua* end as object of approximation, see, e.g., Charles (1999) and G. Lear (2004). On contemplation as a regulative or delimiting aim, see, e.g., Richardson (1992) and Meyer (2011). Not all of these commentators are inclusivists. Nevertheless, they point out different ways in which contemplation can serve as an end without serving as a maximand, i.e., a dominant end in a particular, narrow sense. In Walker (2017: 570–572), I address *EN* X.7, 1177b32–1178a2 and X.8, 1178b25–31, which might seem to construe contemplation as a maximand. Such passages, I argue, simply identify a contemplative life as better than a noncontemplative one. They need not endorse maximizing the amount of contemplation *within* a life.

So, once more, *both* sides of the exclusivism/inclusivism debate can accept that contemplation, for Aristotle, in some way is authoritative within the happiest life. On Aristotle's view, a life in which the exercise of *sophia* – as opposed to some lesser virtue – is authoritative would be at once happiest for a human being and superior to the one led “according to the other virtue” (ὁ κατὰ τὴν ἄλλην ἀρετήν: *EN* X.8, 1178a9). Aristotle could identify “the other virtue” as (1) ethical virtue (the virtue of the nonrational, but reason-responsive, element of the human soul); as (2) the intellectual virtue of *phronêsis* (the “other virtue” of the practical element of the authoritatively rational power of the soul); or as (3) some composite of ethical virtue and *phronêsis* that one could label “practical virtue.” However one parses “the other virtue,” Aristotle's point is straightforward enough: a life led according to this other virtue would count as happy, yet only in some secondary sense (1178a9–13).

Exclusivists and inclusivists together can accept these points about contemplation's ultimacy as common ground. Consider, then, Aristotle's central argument for contemplation's status as (some sort of) ultimate end.⁴⁹ According to this argument, as presented in *EN* X.7, when we engage in action (*praxis*), we obtain goods aside from the good of acting itself. When we contemplate, by contrast, “nothing comes to be from this [i.e. from contemplation] aside from contemplating” (παρὰ τὸ θεωρῆσαι: 1177b2). Contemplation, then, “seems to be the only activity loved on account of itself” (1177b1–2).

In fleshing out this argument, Aristotle compares the leisured activity of contemplation with military action and political action. The latter kinds of action exercise the practical virtues (1177b6–7); and then, as now, they had popular esteem in their favor. As ultimate ends, however, they fare badly, for they aim (instrumentally) at separate ends and thus lack leisure (1177b7–8). Military action is “entirely” unleisured: no sane person would fight just for its own sake, instead of for peace (1177b8–12). Even political action aims at separate ends. In its more debased forms, politics aims at providing others with favors. In its finer forms, politics aims at the happiness of the politician and of his fellow citizens, a goal that Aristotle thinks is “different from politics” itself (1177b14–15). Indeed, leisured contemplation is *itself* the nonpolitical goal at which politics aims:

So if, of the actions according to virtues, political and military actions are distinguished in nobility and stature, but these [are] unleisurely and aim at

⁴⁹ I say more about *EN* X.7's other arguments in [Chapter 8](#).

a certain end and are not choiceworthy on account of themselves (δι' αὐτὰς), but the activity of the intellect (ἡ . . . τοῦ νοῦ ἐνέργεια), being contemplative (θεωρητική), seems both to be superior in worth and to aim at no end beside itself (παρ' αὐτήν) . . . this would be the complete happiness of a human being (1177b16–25).

Elsewhere, Aristotle holds that practical action exists for the sake of philosophical leisure (e.g., *Politics* VII.2, 1325a5–7; VII.3, 1325b16–21; VII.14, 1333a16–b5; VII.15, 1334a22–25). Likewise, *Metaphysics* A.2 describes contemplation as the only truly free activity:

[A]s we search for this [i.e., *sophia*] on account of no other advantage (δι' οὐδεμίαν . . . χρεῖαν ἐτέραν), but just as we call the human being free [who is] for the sake of himself and not another (ὁ αὐτοῦ ἕνεκα καὶ μὴ ἄλλου ὦν), so too [we call] this [science free] as being free alone among the sciences; for it alone is for the sake of itself (αὐτῆς ἕνεκέν: 982b24–28).

For Aristotle, contemplation neither serves nor slaves for any ends above it. Instead, contemplation enjoys true freedom. Aristotle, then, is unsurprised that philosophy first arose in societies where people had free time to devote to leisure (*Metaphysics* A.2, 982b22–24; cf. A.1, 981b20–25). In such passages, Aristotle speaks with what Andrea Wilson Nightingale calls a “rhetoric of disinterest.”⁵⁰ In arguing for contemplation's ultimacy, Aristotle emphasizes contemplation's *uselessness* and *leisured non-productiveness*. These features of contemplation signal that contemplation is choiceworthy for itself and not for the sake of (particular) higher ends. They indicate that contemplation has the character of an ultimate end.

Even before *EN* X.7–8, the *Nicomachean Ethics* has portrayed contemplation as useless and nonproductive. (1) According to *EN* VI.7, *theôria* will seek to understand not human affairs, but rather, cosmic first principles and final causes: it would be “out of place if someone believed political science or *phronêsis* to be most important (σπουδαιοτάτην), if [the] human being is not the best of the things in the cosmos” (1141a20–22). (2) In distinguishing between *phronêsis* and *sophia*, *EN* VI.7 appeals to popular impressions about Anaxagoras and Thales, both of whom seem to possess *sophia*, but lack *phronêsis*. People assume such high-flown thinkers “to be contemplatively wise (σοφούς) but not practically wise (φρονίμους), when they see [the contemplatively wise] ignorant of the things benefiting themselves” (1141b4–6). Such thinkers' knowledge is thought to be

⁵⁰ Nightingale (2004: 191).

“extraordinary and wonderful and difficult and divine, but useless” because such thinkers do not pursue human goods (1141b6–8; cf. Plato, *Theaetetus* 174a). (3) According to *EN* VI.12, *sophia*, unlike *phronêsis*, does not identify the means to particular human goods: “For *sophia* will not behold the things from which [the] human being will attain happiness (for it is [wisdom] of nothing coming into being)” (1143b19–20).

Aristotle, however, faces the charge that contemplation lacks worth *because* it is useless and nonproductive. In his immediate context, Aristotle faces this objection as part of a larger debate between rival conceptions of philosophy. Whereas Plato and Aristotle defend a broadly contemplative conception of philosophy, their opponent, Isocrates, defends rhetoric as philosophy. On Isocrates’ view, “philosophy” consists in those studies that make one wise, where wisdom consists in the useful ability to speak, i.e., use *logos*, well in practical affairs.⁵¹ In the *Antidosis*, a speech modeled on Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*, Isocrates defends his own conception of philosophy against its contemplative rival. At *Antidosis* 261–264, Isocrates attacks his opponents’ contemplative studies on the basis of their uselessness:

Most men see in such studies nothing but empty talk and hair-splitting; for none of these disciplines has any useful application either to private or to public affairs; nay, they are not even remembered for any length of time after they are learned because they do not attend us through life nor do they lend aid in what we do, but are wholly divorced from our necessities (μήτε τῷ βίῳ παρακολουθεῖν μήτε ταῖς πράξεσιν ἐπαμύνειν, ἀλλ’ ἔξω παντάπασιν εἶναι τῶν ἀναγκαίων: *Antidosis* 262; trans. Norlin; cf. *Helen* 5–6; *Letter to Alexander*).

According to Isocrates, contemplative studies offer us no guidance in the practical affairs of life. They fail to meet any vital human needs. They offer nothing but tiresome eristics and vain speculation. Against contemplation so construed, Isocrates defends the superiority of his rhetorical education on the basis of its practical utility (*Antidosis* 84–85; cf. *Ad Nicocles* 39).⁵²

⁵¹ See Isocrates, *Antidosis* 255; 271; 285. On Isocrates’ conception of philosophy, see Nightingale (1995: 26–28); Cooper (2004: 71–77); Wareh (2012); and Collins (2015: 174–177).

⁵² In Iamblichus’ *DCMS* 79.5–81.1, which Hutchinson and Johnson (unpublished work A) plausibly attribute to the *Protrepticus*, a distinctively Isocratean voice raises worries about the usefulness of mathematics and natural philosophy. On the competition between Isocrates and Aristotle, see Depew (2004); Wareh (2012); Collins (2015); and Hutchinson and Johnson (unpublished work B). Plato, meanwhile, also considers broadly Isocratean worries about Academic philosophy: see *Phaedrus* 278e–279b; *Gorgias* 484c–485d (cf. *Antidosis* 267–268). See also Adeimantus’ worry in *Republic* VI.487c–d, and Socrates’ reply at 489b–c.

Isocrates, then, presses something like the utility question that I articulated in [Chapter 1](#): if contemplation is useless, then how can it be central to the human good? The *Protrepticus*' taking pains to respond to Isocrates shows Aristotle's awareness that the contemplative life was controversial, and that contemplation, given its uselessness, required defense.

In his initial response to Isocrates, Aristotle offers an *aristocratic defense of contemplation*.⁵³ This defense makes a surprising move: it *highlights* contemplation's uselessness – its leisured freedom as opposed to its slavish servility to other goals – to raise doubts about one implicit premise to which contemplation's opponents subscribe. This is the premise that contemplation's uselessness proves its lack of choiceworthiness as an end of pursuit. In response, Aristotle argues that even if contemplation is useless for producing further benefits, or for promoting higher ends, that does not count against contemplation's choiceworthiness. On the contrary, if contemplation is useless, then it meets at least one of the necessary conditions for being an ultimate end.

To show how the *Protrepticus* develops this response, I examine two passages from *Protrepticus* 9 that together present this defense in a particularly clear form. The first passage, *Protrepticus* 9, 52.16–20/B42, distinguishes two kinds of goods:

To seek from all knowledge something else to be generated [other than itself] and to require it to be useful (χρησίμην) is [characteristic] of one altogether ignorant of how much from the start good things and necessary things (τὰ ἀγαθὰ καὶ τὰ ἀναγκαῖα) are separate; for they differ completely.

In distinguishing “necessary things” from “good things,” Aristotle distinguishes between (1) *instrumental goods* that are choiceworthy because necessary for the sake of higher ends and (2) *complete goods* choiceworthy for their own sakes. Necessary goods – which Aristotle calls “the things loved on account of something else and without which living is impossible” (52.20–21) – are choiceworthy because they result in or produce complete goods, the goods Aristotle says “are loved on account of themselves, even if nothing else comes to pass” (52.22–23). So, for complete goods, Aristotle says, it is foolish necessarily to expect some “other benefit beside the thing itself” (ὠφέλειαν ἑτέραν παρ’ αὐτὸ τὸ πρᾶγμα: 52.26–27). In certain cases, it is misguided to ask “‘What then [is] the profit (ὄφελος) to us?’ and ‘What [is the] use (χρησίμουν)?’” (52.27–28). Isocrates’ worries thus overlook a key distinction.

⁵³ Nightingale (2004: ch. 5, esp. 195; 226–227) nicely captures the “aristocratic” features of Aristotle’s defense.

Complete goods need not be choiceworthy for any higher or more complete ends. Hence, Aristotle thinks, at least some complete goods in a human life will lack instrumental value for the sake of higher ends within that life. In particular, the *ultimate* (or *most complete*, or *most final*) end in a human life will lack such instrumental value. But since lacking instrumental value for the sake of a higher end is in some sense to be useless, at least some complete goods, the ultimate ends of human lives, will be useless. Therefore, even if contemplation is useless, contemplation need not lack choiceworthiness for its own sake. Rather, contemplation's uselessness is consistent with its potential status as the ultimate end of the happiest human life.

Aristotle does not say that uselessness is *sufficient* for being a highest end. Countless useless activities, after all, are weird and pointless. Thus, Aristotle can agree that, in ordinary contexts, hoarding expired coupons or counting the number of times the letter "k" appears in the works of Anthony Trollope are simply not worth one's time. Still, even if these useless activities are not worth pursuing, other useless activities – ultimate ends – might be. So, Aristotle's aristocratic defense emphasizes contemplation's leisured uselessness to show that contemplation meets at least one of the necessary conditions for being an ultimate end. Contemplation is not choiceworthy for the sake of monistic ends higher than itself.⁵⁴

The second passage, *Protrepticus* 9, 53.15–26/B44, appeals even more directly to contemplation's leisured uselessness to show that contemplation is a complete good:

[It is] nothing terrible, then, [if contemplation] does not show itself being useful (χρησίμη) or profitable (ωφέλιμος). For we say not that it is profitable (ωφέλιμον) but good, and [that] it should be chosen not on account of something else, but on account of itself. For as we travel to Olympia for the sake of the spectacle itself (αὐτῆς ἕνεκα τῆς θέας), even if nothing more were to follow from it (for the contemplation itself is better than much money), and as we contemplate the Dionysia not in order to take something from the actors but as spending [on them], and [as] we would choose many other spectacles (θέας) instead of much money (ἀντὶ πολλῶν χρημάτων), so also the contemplation of the universe (τὴν θεωρίαν τοῦ παντός) is to be honored [more than] all the things thought to be useful (χρησίμων).

Once more, Aristotle challenges the thought that contemplation's uselessness and failure to promote financial profit are necessarily worrisome. It is

⁵⁴ According to, e.g., Nightingale (2004: 230–231), Aristotle identifies uselessness as a good-making feature of contemplation. Like Kraut (1989: 194), I hold that Aristotle thinks that uselessness is merely a necessary condition of contemplation's counting as a highest end.

not “terrible” that contemplation fails to be useful or profitable, Aristotle says, for contemplation is not an instrumental good choiceworthy for the sake of bringing about other results. Instead – like the contemplation of excellent Olympic athletes and the contemplation of dramatic performances at the Dionysia – philosophical contemplation is a complete good choiceworthy for its own sake. To identify goods such as wealth as higher than contemplation is to reveal mistaken priorities. Instrumental goods are choiceworthy *for the sake of contemplation*, not the reverse.

The *Protrepticus* thus defends a view shared by the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The thought: if you devote your time to a properly elevated kind of philosophical activity – the contemplation of the universe and its ordering by (divine) intellectual activity – then you can respond to the critics of philosophy. Uselessness is not necessarily a bad-making feature of contemplation. Uselessness is actually a necessary condition for something’s being one of the very best of goods.

For Aristotle, then, contemplation of the divine – the exercise of contemplative *nous* according to *sophia* – is in some way the ultimate end within a human life. But human beings are organisms, composite substances whose being consists in the possession and exercise of various life-functions. To understand Aristotle’s views on contemplation’s place in the human good fully, one must understand Aristotle’s general views (1) about why living organisms possess the functions they do and (2) about how these functions benefit those organisms. Exploring this background will raise worries about how well Aristotle’s account of the distinctively human good coheres with Aristotle’s more general views. As we will see, Isocrates’ complaints about contemplation’s uselessness are deeper and more troublesome than they perhaps first appear. The utility question will return with a bite.

The Threptic Basis of Living

3.1 Why Examine the Nutritive Basis of Life?

Aristotle identifies contemplation as, in some sense, the most authoritative function in the human soul and the ultimate end within a human life. One lives well and leads a happy life when one exercises this authoritative function virtuously. But how well do these claims about *the human good* cohere with Aristotle's views about how living organisms, as such, live well and attain their good? To answer this question, I explore Aristotle's views on the various powers of soul, how they are hierarchically nested, what it means for a life-function *to be* authoritative within a given kind of soul, and how authoritative life-functions contribute to an organism's wellbeing. I examine these issues in this chapter and the next.

To begin, I examine the life-functions of the nutritive-reproductive power, the *threptikon*, the fundamental life-function in virtue of which any organism lives. Commentators on Aristotle's ethics have largely ignored this power. Aristotle, after all, denies that nutritive-reproductive functions are part of the distinctively human good (*EN* I.13, 1102a32–12). Nevertheless, for Aristotle, the human good consists in a certain kind of excellent *living*. And living, for the perishable organisms that human beings are, requires a living body to exercise a whole range of life-functions – a body that the *threptikon* preserves.

As we will see, all life-activities, including contemplation, depend on the nutritive power. And all living organisms require the nutritive power for their synchronic and diachronic persistence. The nutritive power, then, establishes the basic constraints within which not only Aristotle's account of the human good, but also his account of the good for any living organism, must operate. For even if an organism possesses powers higher than nutrition and reproduction, the exercise of these higher powers should not impede or oppose the exercise of the nutritive power.¹ Indeed, as I argue, Aristotle

¹ See M. Johnson (2005: 232).

accepts the stronger view that the higher powers should, in their own way, *facilitate* the basic nutritive-reproductive ones. Whether contemplation can meet these conditions, then, is a matter that we must explore.

3.2 Aristotle on the Parts of Soul

For Aristotle, the human good is activity of soul according to the best and most complete virtue. But what is the soul? *DA* II.1 offers a “rough definition and outline” (413a9–10). First, the soul is that in virtue of which natural bodies possess life (412a14–15). Second, the soul is “the substance *qua* form of a natural body potentially having life” (412a19–21; b10–11). The soul, in other words, is that by virtue of which a natural living body is alive.

To explain, Aristotle draws an analogy between living organisms and eyes: “For if the eye were an animal, sight would be the soul of it; for this is the substance of eye – that in accord with its *logos*. But the eye is matter for sight, and with this failing, no longer is it an eye, except homonymously, just like the [eye] in stone and the [eye] painted” (412b18–22; cf. *Meteorology* IV.12, 390a10–14). What does Aristotle mean? Consider two kinds of actuality (ἐντελέχεια) – (1) being an actual knower of *X* by virtue of possessing the developed power to know *X* and (2) being an actual knower of *X* by actively exercising that developed power in *knowing X*. Given this distinction, the soul is the actuality of the body in the first sense. That is, “the soul is the first actuality of a natural body potentially having life” (412a27–28). In sum, the soul is a power for life in virtue of which a natural body is an *actual* living organism of a certain kind.

Aristotle offers the preceding as a general account of soul. Yet “living” (ζῆν), Aristotle holds, “is said in many ways” (*DA* II.2, 413a22). There are various *kinds* of living, and so various kinds of soul. For Aristotle, something is living if it possesses at least one of the following four “kinds,” or powers, of soul: (1) “motion according to food and wasting away as well as growth” (κίνησις ἢ κατὰ τροφήν καὶ φθίσις τε καὶ αὔξησις); (2) perception (αἴσθησις); (3) locomotion (κίνησις καὶ στάσις ἢ κατὰ τόπον); and (4) intellect (νοῦς) (413a23–25). Thus, Aristotle later proposes that life is defined by (1) the nutritive-reproductive (θρεπτικῶ); (2) perceptive (αἰσθητικῶ); (3) mobile (κινήσει); and (4) discursively thoughtful (διανοητικῶ) powers (413b12–13; II.3, 414a31–414b1).

DA II.2–3 outlines how these various life-functions are distributed among different kinds of organisms. For some powers belong to certain kinds of life; some powers do not (*DA* II.3, 414a30–31). Certain powers, in

other words, are *separable* from other powers. All living organisms, for instance, possess the *threptikon*, the nutritive-reproductive power that distinguishes plants and by virtue of which they count as living organisms (*DA* II.2, 413a35–414b2; 413b7–8; cf. *Somn.* I, 454a12–20). Since no other life-function belongs to plants, the threptic power admits of being separated (χωρίζεσθαι: *DA* II.2, 413a31) from the other life-functions.² A plant can instantiate the threptic power without co-instantiating the other life-functions – viz., perception, locomotion, and intellect. But while the *threptikon* can exist separately from other life-functions, the others cannot exist separately from the *threptikon* – at least in mortal beings (*DA* II.2, 413a31–32). Thus, Aristotle leaves open the possibility that immortal beings – gods – can possess at least some powers or “portions of soul” (μέρια τῆς ψυχῆς: *DA* II.2, 413b27–28) without possessing the *threptikon*.

To continue: while plants possess the *threptikon* alone, nonhuman animals possess *both* the threptic power *and* a power for perception. The perceptive powers of animals distinguish animals from plants: “if they have perception,” Aristotle writes, “we call them animals and do not merely say they are alive.” Further, perception endows animals with powers of desire (ὀρεξις) and imagination (φαντασία) (*DA* II.2, 413b22–23, though concerning imagination, there may be exceptions: see II.3, 414b16). By possessing the perceptive part of soul (the αἰσθητικόν), animals also possess the desiring part (the ὀρεκτικόν) (*DA* II.3, 414b1–2; cf. *Somn.* I, 454b30–31). Animals must possess *at least* a power for touch – “the most necessary” sense (*DA* II.2, 414a3) – even if they lack other sense modalities (e.g., sight and hearing). Again, touch is “separable” from the other sense-powers (*DA* II.2, 413b5–7). But while all animals *qua* perceptive possess touch, some animals also possess the other senses (*DA* II.2, 413b7). Animals that possess the other senses – in particular, sight – possess locomotive powers as well (*DA* III.12, 434b24–25).

Having surveyed the life-functions of plants and animals, Aristotle examines the higher functions – viz., calculation and discursive thought (λογισμὸν καὶ διάνοιαν: *DA* II.3, 415a8). Once more, to possess these higher powers is also to possess the threptic, perceptive, and locomotive powers. Yet an organism can possess the threptic, perceptive, and locomotive powers without possessing the rational powers (*DA* II.3, 415a8–10).

Aristotle initially seems to construe calculation, discursive thought, and *nous* as roughly identical (see *DA* II.2, 413a23–25, 413b12–13; II.3, 414a31–32). Yet Aristotle elsewhere distinguishes these rational powers,

² In what follows, I use Furth’s (1988) “threptic” for the more cumbersome “nutritive-reproductive.”

sometimes carefully. For instance, *DA* II.3 differentiates calculation and discursive thought (λογισμὸν καὶ διάνοιαν: 415a8) from the contemplative intellect (τοῦ θεωρητικοῦ νοῦ), which has a distinct *logos* (*DA* II.3, 415a11–12). Further, concerning “the intellect and the contemplative power” (τοῦ νοῦ καὶ τῆς θεωρητικῆς δυνάμεως), Aristotle says, “nothing yet is clear” (*DA* II.2, 413b24–25). The contemplative intellect seems to be a “different kind of soul” (ψυχῆς γένος ἕτερον), one which admits of separation from the other life-functions “as the everlasting [admits of separation] from the perishable” (*DA* II.2, 413b26–27). Perhaps a god, which *DA* I.1, 402b7 identifies as a living being, can instantiate the contemplative intellect without coinstantiating the threptic, perceptive, and locomotive powers.³

Aristotle compares *DA* II.1’s general account of the soul to a general definition of the polygon (*DA* II.3, 414b20–33). Such an account applies to triangles, rectangles, pentagons, and so forth, but it is nevertheless too general for any species of polygon. Similarly, while *DA* II.1’s general account of soul as “the first actuality of a body potentially having life” applies to nutrition, perception, locomotion, and so forth, it nevertheless fails to fit any species of soul. For *each kind* of living organism – plant, beast, human being – one must provide a specific account of its form of life (*DA* II.3, 415a1).

Thus, Aristotle extends the analogy between polygons and the parts of soul in another way (414b28–33). Polygons, Aristotle notes, have a nested, serial ordering. (1) The most basic polygon is the triangle, which is followed by the rectangle. (2) But the rectangle potentially contains within itself the triangle. (3) The pentagon, in turn, follows the rectangle in serial order and potentially contains within itself the rectangle. Likewise, the functions of living organisms follow a similar nested order. (1*) At the bottom of this hierarchy (and parallel to the triangle) stand self-nourishing, growth, and decay – the characteristic threptic powers of plant life. (2*) Above them stand perception and appetite (and imagination and locomotion). These characteristic powers of animal life potentially contain the *threptikon* within themselves: the *threptikon* is *implicit* within perception. (3*) At the top of the hierarchy stand reason, thought, and intellect – the characteristic powers of human beings – which themselves potentially contain the threptic, perceptive, and locomotive powers. (4*) Finally, one of these

³ Following Caston (1999: 209–210) and Burnyeat (2008: 29). On the distinction between discursive thought (διάνοια) and *nous*, see also *DA* I.4, 408b24–27, discussed by Sachs (2001: 29–32) and Menn (2002: 92n11).

rational powers, contemplative *nous*, may be separable from the powers below it (perhaps when possessed by immortal, immaterial gods).

Why, on Aristotle's view, are the powers of soul successively ordered? How can one explain this nested hierarchy of life-functions? Aristotle himself thinks this question demands an answer (*DA* II.3, 414b33–415a1; cf. II.2, 413b9–10; 414a1), and he finally addresses it in *DA* III.12.⁴ To understand his response, one must first examine why all perishable organisms require the *threptikon*.

3.3 Understanding the *Threptikon*: The Metaphysics of Mortal Beings

According to *DA* III.12, “It is necessary for all that lives and has soul to have the nutritive soul (Τὴν μὲν οὖν θρεπτικὴν ψυχὴν ἀνάγκη πᾶν ἔχειν ὅτι περ ἂν ζῆ καὶ ψυχὴν ἔχῃ), from generation and until death; for it is necessary for the generated to have growth and maturity and decline; but these without nourishment are impossible” (434a22–25). The *threptikon*, in other words, is necessary for all organisms if they are to attain their complete adult forms, function accordingly, and decline – i.e., if they are *to live* as the mortal beings they are. Thus, Aristotle identifies the *threptikon* as “the first and most common power of soul” (καὶ πρώτη καὶ κοινοτάτη δύναμις ἐστὶ ψυχῆς: *DA* II.4, 415a24–25; cf. 416b25), the power “according to which living belongs to all” (καθ’ ἣν ὑπάρχει τὸ ζῆν ἅπασιν: *DA* II.4, 415a25), and the “power such as to preserve the thing having it as such” (ἡ μὲν τοιαύτη τῆς ψυχῆς ἀρχὴ δύναμις ἐστὶν οἷα σῶζειν τὸ ἔχον αὐτὴν ἢ τοιοῦτον: *DA* II.4, 416b17–19). The *threptikon* is a power for self-maintenance. So, why do all living organisms require such a power?

Living organisms are paradigmatic composite substances (*Metaphysics* Z.7, 1032a18–19), unified wholes of form and matter. Understanding the *threptikon* thus requires a brief venture into Aristotelian metaphysics. Recall *DA* II.1's account of the soul as the first actuality of a body having life potentially. As the functionality of the functional organism, the soul is the organism's form; the organized body, its matter. The soul – the organism's form – may be analytically distinct from the body. Yet the soul is existentially inseparable from its body, just as an impression in wax is analytically distinct from the wax, but existentially inseparable from it (*DA* II.1, 412b6–9). To generalize, the forms of composite substances must be

⁴ Cf., e.g., Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, 252; Hicks (1907: 573); Polansky (2007: 534–535); Shields (2016: 369).

enmattered in some stuff suitable for such substances' exercising their functions (*DA* I.1, 403b3; *Physics* II.2, 194b8–9).

In turn, Aristotle suggests, the material elements – Earth, Air, Fire, and Water – somehow ultimately constitute the matter out of which *all* sub-lunary compounds come to be (*Metaphysics* Δ.6, 1016a23–24). All bodies are ultimately (somehow) generated out of these elements (*DC* III.8, 306b19–20; *GC* II.8; *PA* I.1, 640b15–17). Moreover, these elements themselves are generated from one another (*DC* III.6, 305a31–32; *GC* I.1, 315a11–15; II.4). Hence, every body is “either an element or from elements” (ἢ στοιχεῖον ἢ ἐκ στοιχείων: *DC* III.7, 306b1).⁵

What does Aristotle mean? For Aristotle, the matter of some substance, *S*, is that from which *S* *proximately* comes to be or is generated. Consider, for example, a simple artifact, such as a brazen sphere. According to Aristotle, the brass capable of taking on the sphere's form is generated from the elements, and the sphere is generated from the brass. Yet the sphere itself is not generated from elements. For Aristotle, the elements are not, strictly speaking, matter for the substance: “Earth is not yet potentially a statue, for [only if] undergoing a change will it be brass” (*Metaphysics* Θ.7, 1049a16–18). That *from which* a substance is made – the substance's material cause – is matter which is *ready* to constitute the substance (*Metaphysics* H.4, 1044b2–3). The matter proper to a substance, then, possesses a ready power to realize the form of that substance. “[N]othing needs to be added or removed or changed” to or from such matter (*Metaphysics* Θ.6, 1049a9–11). Therefore, some matter *M* constitutes *proximate matter* (ἡ ἐσχάτη ὕλη: *Metaphysics* H.6, 1045b18) for substance *S* with form *F*, just in case *M* possesses an immediate power to – is *ready* to – realize *F*.⁶

Once a substance is generated out of its proximate matter – once the proximate matter exhausts its power *to become* a sphere and instead fully activates its power *to be* a sphere⁷ – the proximate matter is transformed (*Metaphysics* Z.7, 1033a20–23). The brass, *qua* fully manifesting its power to constitute a sphere, actively constitutes a *sphere*. Nevertheless, the proximate matter from which a composite is generated is preserved *potentially*

⁵ If only matters were this clear. First, while Aristotle suggests that the four elements can generate themselves into one another by virtue of their potentialities for the Hot, Cold, Dry, and Moist, he occasionally suggests that the Hot, Cold, Dry, and Moist are themselves the ultimate constituents of composite substances (*PA* II.1, 646a12ff; II.2, 648b8–10). Second, Aristotle might seem to imply that the elements themselves come to be out of prime matter (*GC* II.1, 329a24ff). Here, I bracket these issues.

⁶ On “readiness to constitute” as a criterion of matter, see Beere (2009: 274).

⁷ Cf. Freeland (1987: 397) and Kosman (2013: 80–81).

in the generated composite (*Physics* I.9, 192a25–29; *GC* I.10, 327b22–31). The proximate matter is preserved as the substance’s *material properties*.⁸ Thus, the sphere generated from brass is not *brass*; yet the brass persists potentially in the sphere’s *brazen* features. Similarly, candles are not wax (κηρὸν), but *waxen* (κήρινον); and boxes are not wood (ξύλον), but *wooden* (ξύλινον) (*Physics* VII.3, 245b9–246a1; *Metaphysics* Z.7, 1033a16–22).

To generalize: where some substance *S* is generated from some matter *M*, there comes to be an *M-en* (or, in Greek, an *M-ινον*) *S* (*Metaphysics* Θ.7, 1049a18–21). So, in the sphere’s case, the brass fully discloses its power to constitute a sphere by persisting in the sphere’s *brazen* properties. But a substance comes to be from its proximate matter, and not from the elements. A substance, then, will bear the material properties of its proximate matter, not of the elements. Just as a box is not wood, but *wooden* (οὐ ξύλον ἀλλὰ ξύλινον), and just as wood is not Earth, but *earthen* (οὐδὲ τὸ ξύλον γῆ ἀλλὰ γῆϊνον), the box is *wooden*, not Earth nor *earthen* (οὐ γῆϊνον οὐδὲ γῆ ἀλλὰ ξύλινον; *Metaphysics* Θ.7, 1049a19–23).

Aristotle, however, clarifies that the elements *do* persist in the composite substance, if only in a highly qualified way. The elements are not *the* matter of the substance and do not persist in a robust way as *the* material properties of the composite. Still, the elements persist as what I call *elemental qualifications* of the composite’s material properties. To articulate this qualified notion of material constitution, Aristotle uses not an *-ινον* ending (in English: *-en*), but rather a *-δες* ending (in English: *-y*). Thus, while (1) the box *qua* matter is *wooden*, and while (2) the box *qua* *wooden* is not *earthen* (γῆϊνον) – for only the *wood* is *earthen* – (3) the box *qua* *wooden* is still *earthy* (γεῶδες). Wooden things are not *earthen* things, yet wooden things maintain an “earthy” cast. The trace of “earthiness” that persists in the wooden box counts as Earth’s elemental qualification of the wooden box’s material properties.⁹

Just as bronze, brass, wood, and the like are uniform bodies (or homoiomerous stuffs) fit for constituting spheres, so flesh, bones, blood, sinew, fibers, leaves, and roots are uniform bodies suitable for constituting living organisms (*Meteorology* IV.10, 388a16–21). And just as the material

⁸ For further discussion, see Beere (2009: 268–269) and M.L. Gill (1989a: 201–202).

⁹ M.L. Gill (1989a) rightly attributes to Aristotle the view that the elements persist potentially in the substance as the substance’s material properties (in some sense of “material properties”). Still, I think Gill runs into difficulties when she suggests that the elements persist as the *-en/-ινον* variety material properties of composite substances. In particular, *Metaphysics* Θ.7, 1049a18–21 opposes her claim (202) that human beings are *earthen*. Yet if human beings are only *earthy*, her basic claim holds.

properties of spheres bear some elemental qualifications, so do the material properties of living organisms. While some animals have watery blood (*PA* II.4, 650b16), other animals have thicker, more fibrous blood – blood whose fibers are “earthy” (γεῶδες: 651a1), or “of earth” (γῆς: 651a7). But these thick-blooded animals, like all animals, are themselves constituted from their blood (651a13–15; cf. *GA* I.19, 726b5). Consequently, although these thick-blooded animals are not earthen, the earthiness of their blood qualifies their material properties as animals. Thick-blooded animals are “earthier in nature” (γεωδέστερα τὴν φύσιν: 650b33) than watery-blooded animals. Similarly, Aristotle compares different sorts of animals by the sorts of *teeth* they possess (*PA* II.9). Teeth are generated from bone (*HA* I.11, 493a2; III.7, 516a25–27). Bone, in turn, is generated predominantly from Earth (*Meteorology* IV.10, 389a11–13). Yet while teeth therefore (by *Metaphysics* Θ.7’s criteria) cannot be earthen, they nevertheless are earthy (γεῶδη: *PA* II.9, 655b12; cf. *PA* III.2, 663b29–30). Since four-footed animals both defend themselves and chew with teeth, and since earthy parts are best suited for defense, they have more earthy parts than human beings. Hence, four-footed animals are “earthier” (γεωδестέρων: *PA* II.9, 655b14–15) than human beings. Larger animals have more of “the bodily and earthy” (τὸ σωματῶδες καὶ γεῶδες) matter than smaller animals (*PA* III.2, 663b24–25).¹⁰

Living organisms, as composite substances, persist only so long as their forms are realized in suitable proximate matter – and only so long as their (fully potential) proximate matter remains defined or organized by their forms. As paradigmatic composite substances, however, *living organisms are perishable*. Once generated from their proximate matter, composite substances are always at risk of destruction. A substance’s violent destruction by an *external* cause is one source of corruption. Another source is *internal* disintegration (or “natural death”) (*Resp.* 17, 478b24–26). Such corruption is “internal” because the proximate matter that composes the substance is also, paradoxically, responsible for its decomposition. For Aristotle, “the matter [is the] cause of [its] being and [its] non-[being]” (*DC* I.12, 283b4–5; cf. *EN* II.2, 1104a26). The things “from which natural beings are composed [are] the same by which [natural beings] are destroyed” (*DC* I.12, 283b21–22).¹¹

¹⁰ Cf. Whiting (1992: 83). See also King (2001: 195n15) on *Physics* VIII.4, 254b22.

¹¹ The following account is indebted to M.L. Gill (1989a; 1989b: ch. 7). Cf. Freudenthal (1995: 11–17).

How does a living organism's matter lead to the organism's destruction? Consider the material elements from which an organism's proximate matter is generated – the elements from which, e.g., plant fiber and animal flesh come to be and which persist in the elemental qualifications of a composite substance's material properties. According to Aristotle, these elements possess conflicting powers and tendencies. On the one hand, the elements are contraries to one another: Water is contrary to Fire; Earth is contrary to Air (*GC* II.3, 331a1–3). On the other hand, the elements all naturally tend to their varied and contrary places in the Aristotelian cosmos. Fire and Air rise; Earth and Water sink (*Physics* IV.1, 208b11–12; *GC* II.3, 330b31–33). Thus, the competing tendencies of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water – elements that persist potentially as the elemental qualifications of a natural substance's material properties – disrupt the stability of the uniform bodies that these elements constitute. As Aristotle holds, “[t]he incapacities in animals – such as age and decay – are all against nature. For perhaps the whole complex of animals is composed from such [things] that differ in [respect to] their proper places; for none of the parts (μέρῶν) occupies its own place” (*DC* II.6, 288b15–18). Hence, the uniform bodies that constitute the bodies of living organisms are prone to decompose. The uniform bodies that constitute composites are generated only when the contrary powers of the elements attain a mean (*GC* II.7, 334b24–30). But the disruptive tendencies of the elements destabilize this mean. Accordingly, the proper proportions of elements requisite for generating uniform bodies break down and lapse into disproportion.¹² A living organism, in some sense, “becomes” a corpse when it dies, just as wine “becomes” vinegar when it sours. Yet neither the organism nor the wine has powers (properly speaking) to become corpses or vinegar, respectively. Instead, the *matter* that constitutes the organism and the wine (respectively) has this power insofar as this matter becomes corrupted and disproportionate. In hot weather, for instance, wine goes bad because the heat stirs up its earthy sediments (*GA* III.2, 753a23–25).

A living organism's environment can be more or less favorable for that organism's persistence. This environment can impose greater and lesser risks of *external* corruption on the organism. Yet no region of the sublunary world offers a sanctuary where living organisms can insulate themselves from the prospect of destruction. Living beings can never flee the prospect of internal corruption:

¹² Whiting (1992: 83).

The surrounding [environment] either cooperates or resists (ἢ συμπράττει ἢ ἀντιπράττει); and on account of this, things that change their placement become more enduring and less enduring than [their] nature [allows], but in no way [are they] eternal so far as there are contraries; for [their] matter has the contrary immediately. (*Long*. 3, 465b26–30; cf. *Meteorology* IV.1, 379a11)

DA II.4, 415b28ff articulates this point in response to Empedocles, who thinks that one can adequately explain a plant's rooting and growing by reference to the tendencies of a plant's matter. On Empedocles' account, a plant would root itself downward because "downward" would be the plant's earthy matter's natural place. The plant would simultaneously grow upward because "upward" would be its fiery matter's natural place (cf. Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* I.25). Empedocles' view, however, cannot explain the plant's unity. If the plant's earthy matter moved downward, and its fiery matter moved upward, then the plant would tear apart. As the elements, existing potentially in the plant as the elemental qualifications of the plant's material properties, moved toward their proper places, the plant would be destroyed. So, what maintains the plant's unity? Aristotle's answer: the plant's soul, the cause of the plant's growth and nourishment (416a8–9). But plants possess only the threptic power. Thus, the power that organizes the plant's matter is just the *threptikon*.

The upshot: to persist through time, a living organism must maintain itself. Such self-maintenance counteracts (1) the tendency of its matter's elemental constituents to gravitate toward their contrary proper places, and so (2) the tendency of its matter to disintegrate. For there *to be* a living organism of such-and-such a kind, then, an organism requires the power to preserve itself as an organism of a certain kind. Therefore, all organisms require a power for self-maintenance, the *threptikon*.

3.4 The *Threptikon* as Nutritive

As natural, perishable, composite substances, living organisms all share the threptic power. The *threptikon* in some way preserves and maintains an organism. But how? Answering this question will clarify the nutritive power's character. It will also elucidate the character of higher life-functions, which will turn out to engage in a certain commerce with this basic power.

Consider the *threptikon* in its *energeia*, its activity or being-at-work. The *threptikon* reproduces and uses food (γεννῆσαι καὶ τροφῇ χρῆσθαι: DA II.4, 415a26). To account for any mode of life-activity, however, one must first account for the "correlative objects" (τὰ ἀντικείμενα: DA II.4, 415a20) of

such activity. For the *threptikon*'s activity, these correlative objects are food and reproduction (τροφή and γέννησις: *DA* II.4, 415a23). Reproducing and using food are both activities of the *threptikon* as a single "nutritive and generative" life-function. Therefore, Aristotle suggests that we should first clarify the nature of food (*DA* II.4, 416a19–20).

Aristotle identifies three components of nutritive activity: (1) that which is fed (τὸ τρεφόμενον), i.e., the body possessing a soul; (2) that with which it is fed (ὃ τρέφεται) i.e., food; and (3) that which feeds (τὸ τρέφον), viz., the *threptikon* (*DA* II.4, 416b20–22). To focus on (2), the food with which the body possessing soul is fed is organism-relative (*DA* II.4, 416b9–11). Organisms are fed by what has the power to constitute them (*GC* II.8, 335a10ff). For some item to count as food, then, it must (a) be capable of *assimilation* by the organism that feeds on it and (b) be capable of *replenishing* that organism's enformed proximate matter.¹³

In some sense, like is fed by unlike. Through digestion, the *threptikon* takes what is unlike the organism fed (viz., food) and converts it into a state in which it is *like* the organism (*DA* II.4, 416a33–35). In digesting the food and in activating its power to constitute a living body, the *threptikon* acts like an artisan (τέκτων: *DA* II.4, 416b1–2).¹⁴ Just as a good sculptor works clay into a pot, the *threptikon* works food into the organism's proximate matter (cf. *GA* II.4, 740b29ff). In another sense, however, like *is* fed by like. For food is stuff with the power to constitute the organism's proximate matter (not readily, but once digested). To that extent, food is akin to the matter that ultimately constitutes the organism (*DA* II.4, 416b3ff; cf. *Physics* VIII.7, 260a32ff).

Aristotle describes the *threptikon*'s converting food into the living body as akin to the process of mixing water with wine – except if *the wine* converted the water into wine (*GC* I.5, 321a32–b3). In self-nutrition, an external cause does not add matter to that body. Instead, the living body assimilates new matter itself. Although an organism's matter is in flux, then, the organism itself need not be. Aristotle compares a living organism to a certain stretch of river (321b22–28). A one-mile river stretch can persist through time even when the water that composes that stretch – the one-mile stretch's "matter" – constantly fluctuates. This stretch of river is constantly losing its matter: the water that composes it at any given time is constantly flowing away. Yet as new water flows in, the one-mile stretch persists.¹⁵

¹³ "Assimilation" is used by King (2001), from whose work on nutrition in Aristotle I have benefited.

¹⁴ On the *threptikon* as artisan, see Menn (2002: 122).

¹⁵ On *GC* I.5, see Anscombe (1954) and King (2001: 55–58). In other works, Aristotle has more to say about just how this assimilation happens. To assimilate new matter, an organism needs (1) food and

Thus, by assimilating food, the *threptikon* enables living organisms to persist as composite substances. Such organisms “are always nourished and continue to live, as long as they can take food” (*DA* II.2, 413a29–31; cf. *PA* II.10, 655b31–32). While food causes growth to the extent that it increases an organism’s size, food nourishes an organism to the extent the organism is a “certain this and substance” (τόδε τι καὶ οὐσία). Food, in other words, provides matter for a living body of a certain form. “For [the ensouled thing] preserves its substance, and exists as long as it is fed” (σώζει γὰρ τὴν οὐσίαν, καὶ μέχρι τούτου ἔστιν ἕως ἂν τρέφηται: *DA* II.4, 416b13–14). When an organism lacks food to replenish its proximate matter, the organism perishes.¹⁶

In short, the elements out of which uniform bodies are generated always resist the ordering force of the organism’s soul. As they come to display their natural tendencies and capacities, the enformed uniform bodies that constitute a living organism’s proximate matter are always disintegrating. The plant’s leaves, bark, and shoots – like the animal’s flesh, bone, and blood – are always breaking down as the elements reassert themselves by finding their natural places. Living organisms do not immediately perish, however, because all possess a nutritive power to replace their lost matter. In digesting food, such organisms reconstitute the bodies in which they are enmattered. Such organisms thereby maintain themselves as beings of such-and-such kinds both synchronically and diachronically.

3.5 The *Threptikon* as Reproductive

The *threptikon*, then, maintains a living organism through nourishing it. Yet the *threptikon* is also reproductive. How are the *threptikon*’s nutritive and reproductive aspects related? Why, on Aristotle’s view, do self-nutrition and reproduction both belong to the *same* part of soul?

(2) some way to “concoct” that food into its ensouled body. Aristotle compares concoction (πέψις) to boiling and broiling (*Meteorology* IV.2, 379b12ff; IV.3, 381b5–7). That is, concoction requires heat, which perfects the food’s passive powers to become parts of the organism’s matter. So, to digest, living organisms – plants and animals both – require heat (*PA* II.3, 650a3ff; cf. *Resp.* 8, 474b10–12). Aristotle can therefore restate his points about the destruction of organisms in terms of heat. An organism’s death is marked by the destruction of its heat. Violent death comes about when an external source extinguishes an organism’s heat; internal destruction comes about when an organism fails to regulate its heat with refrigeration (*Resp.* 17–18). Freudenthal (1995: 19ff) provides a fuller account of heat and self-maintenance.

¹⁶ Aristotle distinguishes growth from nutrition at *DA* II.4, 416b11–12, but suggests in *GC* I.5, 322a25–26 that both amount to different aspects of the same process.

Like Plato's Diotima (*Symposium* 207c–208b), Aristotle holds that the mortal approximates the immortal through generative means.¹⁷ “[C]oming-to-be always and generation (τὸ γίνεσθαι ἀεὶ καὶ τὴν γένεσιν) are the closest approximations (ἐγγύτατα) of being” (*GC* II.10, 336b33–34). In nature, if *X* comes to be, *X* comes to be from a prior instance of *X*, which *in turn* came to be from a yet prior instance of *X*.

For most natural among the functions for a living thing, so far as [it is] complete and not mutilated or does not have spontaneous generation [is] to make another such as itself – an animal, an animal, and a plant, a plant – in order that it share in the eternal and the divine in the way it is able (τὸ ποιῆσαι ἕτερον οἷον αὐτό, ζῶον μὲν ζῶον, φυτὸν δὲ φυτόν, ἵνα τοῦ ἀεὶ καὶ τοῦ θεοῦ μετέχωσιν ἢ δύνανται); for everything is desirous of that and acts for the sake of that so far as it acts according to nature . . . Since, then, it is unable to share in the eternal and the divine in a continuous way (since none of the perishable things admits of remaining this and one in number) in the way each is able to share, it shares in this, the [one] more and the [other] less, and remains not itself, but such as itself, not one in number, but one in species (καὶ διαμένει οὐκ αὐτὸ ἀλλ’ οἷον αὐτό, ἀριθμῶ μὲν οὐχ ἕν, εἶδει δ’ ἕν: *DA* II.4, 415a26–b7; cf. *GA* II.1, 731b24–732a1; *Politics* I.2, 1252a28–30; Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* I.16.12).

Living organisms reproduce because they cannot preserve themselves forever as numerically identical substances. By reproducing – by preserving their forms in their offspring – organisms approximate the immortal. In Allan Gotthelf's felicitous phrasing, if an organism cannot preserve its *esti*, at least it can preserve its *ti*.¹⁸

If one focuses on the generative means by which the perishable attains immortality as far as it can, one discerns the links between the *threptikon*'s self-nutritive and reproductive aspects. The *threptikon* as *nutritive* preserves an organism by *regenerating* the organism. *Qua* nutritive, the *threptikon* constantly sculpts an organism's food into a form “like” the organism. The *threptikon* as *reproductive*, meanwhile, preserves an organism by generating a numerically distinct organism. *Qua* reproductive, the *threptikon* generates an organism “like” the original. Thus, both the nutritive and

¹⁷ On nutritive replenishment and reproduction as two modes of *genesis* in Diotima's speech, see Sheffield (2006: 103). The similarities are noted, e.g., by Hamlyn ([1968] 1993: 95); Balme (1972 [1992]: 96); Lennox (2001: 158n14); King (2001: 157n98); Sheffield (2006: 101); Polansky (2007: 204–205); Leunissen (2010: 63); Johansen (2012: 119; 126); Shields (2016: 201).

¹⁸ Gotthelf (1975: 338). I see no reason to assume (as does Matthews [1992: 190–193]) that the ultimate goal of the *threptikon* (along with the other life-functions) is to preserve the organism's species as such. On this issue, I concur with Balme ([1972] 1992: 96–97) and (1987: 280); Lennox (1985: 72–73); Gotthelf ([1988] 2012: 58); M. Johnson (2005: 176); Leunissen (2010: 63).

reproductive aspects of the *threptikon* share a common end, viz., “to reproduce something such as itself” (τὸ γεννῆσαι οἶον αὐτό: *DA* II.4, 416b24).

The *threptikon*’s nutritive aspect is for the sake of the reproductive aspect in at least two ways. (i) Nutrition *approximates* reproduction. By *regenerating* the ensouled body and maintaining its existence here and now, the nutritive aspect “generates” in a way that approximates the reproductive aspect’s own generative activity.¹⁹ But for Aristotle, *X*’s approximating *Y* is a way in which *X* can act for the sake of *Y*.²⁰ Therefore, reproductive activity is the *telos* of the *threptikon* as a generative psychic power. Since Aristotle holds that one should call something “after its end” (ἀπὸ τοῦ τέλους: *DA* II.4, 416b23–24), one should refer to the *threptikon*, the first soul, as “reproductive [of] something such as itself” (γεννητική οἶον αὐτό: *DA* II.4, 416b25). (ii) Nutritive activity is necessary as an *instrumental means* to reproduction. Digesting food provides the residues required for reproduction (*GA* I.19, 726b1ff), which the reproductive aspect uses for its own ends.

Given their basic nutritive and reproductive needs as perishable composite substances, then, all living organisms require the *threptikon*. Without some power (1) to assimilate new matter and replace lost matter and (2) to maintain an organism eternally as far as possible (viz., through reproduction), an organism will perish forever. In [Chapter 4](#), I examine how the threptic power serves as a basis for higher powers – just as the threptic power receives benefits from higher powers. Getting clear on these issues, in turn, will elucidate the nature of the good for living organisms generally. Two points, however, should be apparent. First, any higher life-functions that conflict with the *threptikon*’s activity will conflict with a basic power that living organisms require if they are to live and to be at all. Second, the threat of destruction that confronts plants and animals will also confront perishable, sublunary, human contemplators.

¹⁹ Menn (2002: 122) also notes the way that self-nutrition approximates reproduction along the axis of artisanal activity.

²⁰ On approximation as teleological, see G. Lear (2004: ch. 4). On reproduction as the model for nutrition, see Menn (2002: 122). For the thought that some life-functions, and their correlated body parts, subserve others, see *PA* I.5, 645b28–33.

Authoritative Functions, Ultimate Ends, and the Good for Living Organisms

4.1 Threptic Subservience to the *Aisthêtikon*

I return to the problem Aristotle introduces in *DA* II, and which he sets out to answer in *DA* III.12. Why are the powers of soul *nested* the way they are? Why does the perceptive power, the *aisthêtikon*, follow the *threptikon* in serial order? Aristotle, I argue, explains this order teleologically. Understanding precisely *how*, in turn, elucidates Aristotle's views on how living organisms attain their good. Along the way, we will see the deep and fundamental role of an organism's threptic activity in constraining the character of its proper good.

To explore these issues, I turn to the perceptive power, the *aisthêtikon*. Just as the *threptikon* includes a power for nutrition as such, the *aisthêtikon* includes a power for perception as such, i.e., for touching, tasting, seeing, and the like. Yet just as the *threptikon* is a power for reproduction and growth as well, so too the *aisthêtikon* is a power for desire, imagination, and locomotion. One can separate perception from locomotion: an oyster perceives, yet lacks the horse's mobility. Nevertheless, Aristotle attributes perception, desire, imagination, and locomotion to the *aisthêtikon* as a singular life-function.

Aristotle provides fuller reason to think that these functions are all aspects of the *aisthêtikon*. The powers for desire and avoidance – the *orektikon* and the *phreutikon* – are “not different” (οὐχ ἕτερον) from the *aisthêtikon* (*DA* III.7, 431a8–14). For some object moves an animal insofar as the object affects the *orektikon* (i.e., insofar as the object arouses desire) (*DA* III.10, 433b13–21). “Generally, then,” Aristotle says, “insofar as the animal is capable of desire (ἢ ὀρεκτικὸν τὸ ζῷον) in this respect it can move itself” (*DA* III.10, 433b27–28). Yet an animal can desire an item insofar as it can perceive that item as good or desirable, as an end to be pursued. Perceiving an item in this way, however, requires a power for *phantasia*, or imagination. Hence, animals can desire insofar as they possess a power

for *phantasia* (DA III.10, 433b28–29). Just as reproduction is an analytically distinct, but existentially inseparable, aspect of the nutritive soul, the same holds for *phantasia* in relation to the *aisthêtikon*: “the imaginative power (τὸ φανταστικόν) is identical with that of the perceptive (τῷ αἰσθητικῷ), but the being of the imaginative [power is] different from that of the perceptive [power]” (τὸ δ’ εἶναι φανταστικῷ καὶ αἰσθητικῷ ἕτερον: *Insomn.* I, 459a15–17). Therefore, the *aisthêtikon* is *one* life-function, albeit one with varied aspects.¹

Why, then, does the *aisthêtikon* follow the *threptikon* in serial order? As Aristotle suggests, the answer is that the *threptikon* exists *for the sake of* the *aisthêtikon* and *subserves it*.²

First, the *threptikon* approximates the *aisthêtikon* in activity, responsiveness, and freedom within its surroundings. The *threptikon*, in its responsiveness to its surroundings (manifest in its patterns and directions of growth), shows a crude prefiguring of perception and cognition. Whereas the *threptikon* assimilates matter without assimilating form (DA II.4), the *aisthêtikon* assimilates perceptual form without assimilating matter (DA II.12, 424a17–21; III.2, 425b23–24). The *threptikon* less perfectly becomes one with its object: whereas perception unites with its objects while preserving them, nutrition destroys its objects through ingesting them.³

Second, the *threptikon* is also instrumental for the *aisthêtikon*. As Aristotle notes multiple times, perception requires a suitably enformed body (*De Sensu* I, 436b6–8; DA I.1, 403a5–8; III.4, 429b4; PA II.5, 651b3–5; *Protrepticus* 7, 43.13–17/B75). Further, animal locomotion, as a species of locomotion generally, is the movement of a body with respect to place (DC I.2, 268b14–15). Within perceptive organisms, nutrition is akin to a productive art that makes things, not for their own sakes, but for use by other things. Remaking and regenerating the perceptive body and its component organs is the task of the *threptikon*, which Aristotle analogizes to a productive artisan that exercises its craft for the sake of the *aisthêtikon* (GA II.4, 740b25–34; cf. DA II.4, 416b1–3).⁴

¹ For different accounts of perception, desire, imagination, and locomotion as powers of the *aisthêtikon* (a part of the soul), see Whiting (2002) and Corcilius and Gregoric (2010).

² M. Johnson (2005: 9) agrees that lower (or simpler) life-functions are for the sake of higher (or more complex) life-functions. Leunissen (2010: 59) disagrees, apparently on the basis that “the realization of the more complex capacities contributes to the goals pursued by the basic ones.” I concur that higher functions facilitate basic functions. This point, however, does not preclude basic functions from subserving higher ones. I discuss this issue in Section 4.3.

³ See the stimulating discussion in Diamond (2015: 78–79; 92–112). Cf. Jonas ([1966] 2001: Fourth Essay).

⁴ Menn (2002: 121–122) is especially clear on the *threptikon*’s quasi-artisanal aspects. Cf. King (2001: 45–46); Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s De Anima*, 100; cf. 252.

Thus, one must appreciate the force of Aristotle's claim that while "to separate [the *threptikon*] from the other [powers] is possible, [to separate] the others from this is impossible in mortal beings" (*DA* II.2, 413a31–32; cf. *Resp.* 8, 474b10–11). The higher powers of soul presuppose, indeed require, the *threptikon*'s self-replenishing activity. *Qua* nutritive, the *threptikon* regenerates the body, the medium through which perception and locomotion take place. *Qua* reproductive, the *threptikon* preserves an organism with perceptive and locomotive powers in a state of quasi-immortality so that the organism in some way can keep at work forever perceiving and moving.

At the same time, Aristotle's remarks on the *threptikon*'s separability provide some guidance for determining which life-function is authoritative when one life-function is subordinate to another. Some organisms instantiate the *threptikon* without coinstantiating the *aisthêtikon*. But no organisms instantiate the *aisthêtikon* without coinstantiating the *threptikon*. Hence, if left to its own devices, the *threptikon* will reveal itself in a characteristically vegetative manner, i.e., in the generic activities of self-nutrition and reproduction that various plants perform. When the *aisthêtikon* enters the picture, however, the *aisthêtikon* co-opts the *threptikon* for the *aisthêtikon*'s own ends. Thus, when the *threptikon* is coinstantiated with the *aisthêtikon* (as in animal life), the *threptikon*'s character changes. No longer does it activate itself in the vegetative forms of life that it ordinarily perpetuates (i.e., plant life). Instead, the *threptikon* perpetuates perceptive – which is to say, *animal* – life. The *aisthêtikon* – in virtue of its greater activity, responsiveness, and freedom – reorders and redirects the *threptikon*'s ends and aims (viz., toward perpetuating the various perceptive functions).⁵ The *aisthêtikon* thereby constitutes an end for the *threptikon*.

4.2 Perceptive Guidance and the "Nature Does Nothing in Vain" Principle

The *aisthêtikon* follows the *threptikon* in serial order in part because the *threptikon* subserves the *aisthêtikon*. But the *threptikon*'s approximation to, and instrumentality for, the *aisthêtikon* does not tell the whole story. The teleological relationship between the *threptikon* and the *aisthêtikon* has another dimension. The *aisthêtikon* also follows the *threptikon* because this teleological arrangement makes possible, in perceptive organisms, certain perceptive *benefits* for threptic activity. The *aisthêtikon* follows the

⁵ I owe the term "co-option" to Verity Harte. Jonas ([1966] 2001: 104) makes similar points.

threptikon in serial order, I suggest, because the former plays such a beneficial role in the latter's functioning. Such an arrangement, in turn, best enables perceptive organisms to maintain themselves as perceptive organisms.

Aristotle spells out this point most clearly in *DA* III.12. After explaining why every organism must possess the *threptikon*, Aristotle clarifies the *threptikon*'s relation to the *aisthêtikon*:

But it is necessary for the animal to have perception (τὸ δὲ ζῷον ἀναγκαῖον αἰσθησιν ἔχειν), if nature makes nothing in vain. For all the things [provided] by nature [are] for the sake of [something], or will be accidents of the things for the sake of [something]. If, then, all mobile body lacked perception, it would perish and would not reach [its] *telos*, that which is, from nature, [its] function. (For how will it be nourished [θρέψεται]?) (434a30–434b2)

Here, Aristotle fills out his teleological account of why the *aisthêtikon* follows the *threptikon* in serial order. On this account, the *aisthêtikon* facilitates and *guides* the *threptikon*'s nutritive and reproductive functions. If the *aisthêtikon* did not play this role, Aristotle thinks, then animals would fail to reach the end for the sake of which they exist. Without a power to discern, and direct them toward, food, they would perish before ever attaining full maturity. Hence, they would never get to lead a perceptive life. Further, once animals attain maturity, they require a perceptive power to discern, and direct them toward, food. Therefore, animals require perception.

To explain why animals possess perception, Aristotle appeals to the principle that “nature does nothing in vain” (μηθὲν μάτην ποιεῖ ἡ φύσις; *DA* III.12, 434a31).⁶ According to this principle, where *X* is a living organism, nature always works for the best for *X* *qua* *X*. In turn, the principle identifies the best for *X* *qua* *X* as what contributes to *X*'s maintenance and full active functioning *qua* *X*. “[N]ature does nothing in vain,” Aristotle writes, “but always the best, of all possibilities, in each kind of living thing by reference to its substance (ἀεὶ ἐκ τῶν ἐνδεχομένων τῇ οὐσίᾳ

⁶ For Aristotle's uses of the principle, see, e.g., *DC* II.8, 290a31; II.11, 291b13; *DA* III.12, 434a31; *Resp.* 10, 476a10–15; *PA* IV.11, 691b4; IV.12, 694a15ff; IV.13, 695b19; *IA* 8, 708a9–20; 9, 711a1–6; *GA* II.4, 739b20; II.5, 741b2–5; II.6, 744a37; V.8, 788b20–22; *Politics* I.2, 1253a8–15; I.8, 1256b21. For discussion, see Lennox (2001b); M. Johnson (2005: 80–82); Leunissen (2010: 64–65; Section 4.2); Henry (2013); Gottlieb and Sober (forthcoming). Aristotle is not committed to the view that all biological development or living behavior is teleologically explicable. Eye color (*GA* V.1, 778a29–b19) and the development of the spleen (*PA* III.7, 670a30–31) are incidental concomitants of teleologically explicable phenomena. See M. Johnson (2005: 197), though Lennox (2001a: 270) thinks Aristotle vacillates on the spleen's necessity.

περὶ ἕκαστον γένος ζώου τὸ ἄριστον). For which very reason if one way is better, so also it holds according to nature” (εἰ βέλτιον ὡδί, οὕτως καὶ ἔχει κατὰ φύσιν: *IA* 3, 704b14–18). For all things, nature works by “regarding the best of possibilities for each [thing], preserving the proper substance and essence of each [thing]” (πρὸς τὸ ἄριστον ἀποβλέπουσαν ἕκαστῳ τῶν ἐνδεχομένων, διασώζουσιν ἕκαστου τὴν ἰδίαν οὐσίαν καὶ τὸ τί ἦν αὐτῷ εἶναι: *IA* 8, 708a9–12).⁷ According to the “nature does nothing in vain” principle, then, organisms have body parts that are *useful*. These are the parts best suited for maintaining their substance, and their characteristic functioning, as the kinds of organisms they are. *The principle thus precludes organisms from having useless or unnecessary parts*: “nature makes nothing superfluous” (οὐδὲν ἡ φύσις ποιεῖ περιεργον: *PA* IV.12, 694a15). For any such parts would interfere with an organism’s other, necessary activities – and harm the organism.

Aristotle assumes this principle throughout his biological works. (1) Carnivorous birds lack long necks because such necks “do not serve them” (οὐκ ἂν ὑπηρετεῖ αὐτοῖς: *PA* IV.12, 693a1). Such length would be an impediment to their way of life (ὑπεναντίον τὸ μῆκος πρὸς τὸν βίον: 693a3–4). (2) Birds with talons and powers of flight lack spurs, which are useful only for fighting on the ground. For flying birds, spurs would be “not only useless but actually injurious (οὐ μόνον ἄχρηστοι ἀλλὰ καὶ βλαβεροί); for the claws would stick into the ground and interfere with progression” (ὑπεναντίοι πρὸς τὴν πορείαν ὄντες: *PA* IV.12, 694a15–19; ROT). (3) Fish lack limbs, for “nature makes nothing superfluous or in vain” (οὔτε περιεργον οὐδὲν οὔτε μάτην ἡ φύσις ποιεῖ). Such parts would, presumably, interfere with swimming (*PA* IV.13, 695b17–19). (4) Birds cannot stand fully upright, for if they could, their wings would be as “useless” (ἄχρηστος) as the wings drawn on pictures of Cupids (*IA* II, 711a1–2). Likewise, human beings and other erect animals cannot possess wings, because such wings “would be useless to them for moving according to nature” (ἄχρηστος αὐτοῖς . . . κατὰ φύσιν κινουμένοις: *IA* II, 711a2–7). (5) Living organisms characteristically lack multiple organs for performing the same function. “Hence, since we see that nature does nothing in vain, and if there were two organs one would be purposeless, this is the reason why some animals have gills, others lungs, but none possess both” (ἐπεὶ μάτην οὐδὲν ὁρῶμεν ποιοῦσαν τὴν φύσιν, δυοῖν δ’ ὄντοιν θάτερον ἂν ἦν μάτην, διὰ τοῦτο τὰ μὲν ἔχει βράγχια τὰ δὲ πνεύμονα, ἄμφω δ’ οὐδέν: *Resp.* 10, 476a12–15; ROT).

⁷ Deleting the conjectured addition of ἕκ at a11.

Living organisms, then, possess only *useful* body parts, parts that *benefit* the organism by maintaining and promoting the active functioning of the organism as that kind of organism. Aristotle thus links the *usefulness* of an organism's parts with their *goodness for* that organism. Aristotle's teleological accounts of body parts and morphology in his biology characteristically appeal to the usefulness (and so, the benefit) of those parts, viz., for the self-maintenance and lives of the organisms that possess them.⁸

According to the "nature does nothing in vain" principle, organisms possess parts that are either (1) necessarily required or at least (2) otherwise beneficial or "better" for their self-maintenance and functioning (*PA* I.1, 640a33–b1; II.14, 658a23–24; *GA* I.4, 717a15–16). Organisms do not lack parts that they need; and they are not supplied with parts that fail to contribute to their persistence and wellbeing. What holds for an organism's body parts, however, also holds for the "parts" of an organism's soul, i.e., for the faculties and powers that constitute its soul.⁹ Thus, according to the "nature does nothing in vain" principle, organisms possess only useful powers that contribute to those organisms' persistence and active functioning.

As my comments in [Chapter 3](#) should suggest, the "nature does nothing in vain" principle implicitly explains why living organisms possess the *threptikon*. For without the *threptikon*, sublunary organisms cannot persist synchronically or diachronically, reach maturity, and live their lives. *DA* III.12, however, explicitly – and paradigmatically – appeals to this principle to explain why animals possess perception. From one perspective, simply *to be* an animal is to be able to perceive. Yet without perception, animals cannot satisfy their basic threptic needs. Perception, then, is hypothetically necessary for animals. Without perception, animals would perish, and nature would work in vain.

To elaborate, consider Aristotle's remarks on the "first" form of sense (*DA* II.2, 413b4), touch (ἅψῃ). As discussed, Aristotle calls touch the "most

⁸ See *PA* II.8, 654a19; III.1, 662a33, b3, b7; IV.2, 677a16; IV.4, 678a4–16; IV.8, 683b37; 684a3; IV.9, 685a28; IV.10, 687b29; IV.11, 691b1. These passages are cited by Balme (1987: 277n5), whose discussion informs Gotthelf's remarks ([1988] 2012: 51–53) on usefulness as an evaluative notion in Aristotle's biology. Henry (2013: 235–243) concurs that, for Aristotle, nature works for the best, where "the best" consists in the life of the individual, and where parts are evaluable "in relation to the contribution they make to the organism's survival and well-being." Cf. M. Johnson (2005: 171–178).

⁹ *DA* I.5, 411a24–b14 expresses skepticism about whether the soul has parts. For the soul is the source of an organism's unity. Hence, if it has parts, the question arises of what unifies these parts. Aristotle nevertheless commits himself to the view that the soul has parts as powers. But Aristotle does not identify all powers of soul as parts of soul. Instead, Aristotle identifies as parts of the soul only certain fundamental faculties that can explain other powers and that define different kinds of living organisms. See Corcilius and Gregoric (2010) and Johansen (2012: ch. 3).

necessary” sense for animals (414a3). On the one hand, the *aisthêtikon*, as the highest power possessed by nonhuman animals, is such animals’ *distinguishing* power. Such animals, in principle, can possess touch without possessing the other senses. Hence, an organism without touch no longer counts, or is specifiable, as an animal (*DA* III.13, 435b4–7; *De Sensu* I, 436b10–12). On the other hand, food is necessary for animals (*PA* I.1. 642a7–8), and touch is essential for their obtaining it. Thus, Aristotle defines touch by reference to food. Animals, he says, “have a sense for food (for touch [is the] sense for food; for all living things are fed by dry and moist and hot and cold, and of these things, touch [is the] sense), but of the other objects of perception, [touch is the sense] by coincidence” (*DA* II.3, 414b6–10). Animals must have touch because, to maintain themselves, they must avoid some objects and take other objects (*DA* III.12, 434b16–18). (Aristotle’s account of perception in *DA* III.12 focuses on touch’s relation to food. Yet touch also contributes to animal reproduction. Tactile pleasure stirs animals to have sexual intercourse for its sake [*Problems* IV.15].)

Aristotle, in turn, identifies taste (γεῦσις) as a “certain touch” (ἀφή τις: 434b18; *De Sensu* 4, 441a3; *PA* II.17, 660a21). Taste senses food, “but food is a tangible body” (*DA* III.12, 434b18–19; cf. II.10, 422a8–10). Touch, narrowly speaking, is perception of food’s nutritious features (i.e., its dryness, moistness, hotness, and coldness). Taste, by contrast, touches food to sense its flavors. This latter sort of touching, like touch generally, aims at obtaining food that the animal can assimilate (*De Sensu* I, 436b16–17). Nutritious food typically appears as pleasant to the animal, and bad food as foul. Hence, the animal will typically pursue pleasant food and avoid the unpleasant. Taste, then, is a “sense for the tangible and nutritive” (τοῦ ἀπτοῦ καὶ θρεπτικοῦ αἴσθησις: *DA* III.12, 434b22). In context, the “and” (καὶ) here is probably expegetic: the adjective “nutritive” simply articulates more fully what taste’s tangible object is. Thus, just as touch is a necessary sense, so too is taste (*De Sensu* I, 436b13–15; cf. *DA* II.8, 420b18–19).

Any animal *must* have these senses to obtain food. Aristotle recognizes in *DA* III.12, however, that some animals possess the other senses as well. Neither oysters nor sea anemones possess sight, hearing, and smell. Yet these senses are in some way necessary (ἀνάγκη: 434b26) for mobile animals. Mobile animals, to be sure, can get by from place to place by relying on touch and taste alone. Yet such animals will perform these tasks optimally, with the most assurance of success, when they *do* possess the other senses. To stand the best chance of preserving themselves (εἰ . . . μέλλει σώζεσθαι) when moving from place to place, mobile animals require more than just

touch and taste, i.e., senses that require animals to be in direct contact with the objects they perceive. Such animals also require senses that permit them to perceive objects of pursuit and avoidance from a distance (434b24–27). Because their correlative objects (e.g., sound, color, and odor) are not in themselves nutritious (434b19–21), the other senses (e.g., hearing, sight, and smell) do not secure food for the animal. Instead, these other senses coordinate with the basic senses of touch and taste. More specifically, these other senses “belong to all those that have them for the sake of preservation, in order that they take, foresensing, food, and avoid the bad and destructive” (*De Sensu* I, 436b19–437a1).

Why, then, do organisms possess whatever perceptive powers they do? The answer, for Aristotle, cashes out partly in terms of what those organisms require for their persistence. Perception enables the *threptikon* to perform its proper work most successfully.

4.3 A Puzzle about Nutrition and Perception

DA III.12’s account of the *threptikon*’s relation to the *aisthêtikon*, however, raises a puzzle. When Aristotle explains why animals possess perception, he seems to suggest that perception is teleologically subordinate to threptic activity. For Aristotle points to an animal’s need for perception if that animal is to maintain itself. In other passages, Aristotle seems to identify nutrition and reproduction as an animal’s ultimate aims, at least insofar as animals organize their lives around feeding and reproducing themselves (*GA* I.4, 717a21–22; I.23, 731a24–b8; II.4, 740b34–741a5; *MM* I.10, 1187a30–35). On such grounds, Monte Ransome Johnson argues that, for Aristotle, where the parts of living organisms are *explananda*, there is “no more basic” or “fundamental” *explanans* than threptic activity.¹⁰

I agree with Johnson: nutrition and reproduction, as basic life-functions required by all organisms, *are* fundamental. Johnson, however, apparently identifies threptic functioning’s fundamentality (or primacy) within the soul with its teleological ultimacy. Thus, writing about organisms, Johnson says, “the activity of their own vegetative soul, that is, their own nutrition and reproduction . . . is what everything strives for, and for the sake of this it does everything that it does naturally.”¹¹ Yet Aristotle portrays the threptic power as a kind of artisan that meets the basic needs that its superior, the perceptive

¹⁰ M. Johnson (2005: 174–177).

¹¹ M. Johnson (2005: 232). Elsewhere, however, M. Johnson (2005: 9), suggests that lower capacities exist for the sake of higher ones. Leunissen (2010: 59n32, 66) holds that higher capacities exist ultimately for the sake of the threptic power.

power, requires to fulfill its higher, freer ends. And so, perception cannot be for the sake of threptic activity. On Aristotle's view, to hold that the perceptive power exists for the sake of the threptic power is to invert the proper teleological ordering of the animal soul's constitutive functions.¹²

To make sense of *DA* III.12, then, one must account simultaneously for both the reciprocity and the hierarchy that holds between the threptic and perceptive powers. Given what Aristotle says, the best way to do this is to view perception's role in threptic activity *as ultimately ordered toward perception itself*. In other words, for Aristotle, the perceptive power is useful for threptic activity, but the perceptive power does not *subserve* threptic activity. On the contrary, perception facilitates nutrition in the manner of a superior: perception *guides* nutrition. The former guides the latter *not* because threptic activity is the highest (or teleologically ultimate) function of animal life, but, rather, because fulfilling threptic needs is required for the sake of perception and locomotion. Perception, in other words, *maintains itself through guiding* threptic activity. The threptic and the perceptive powers are reciprocal beneficiaries, but this reciprocity is asymmetrically ordered *for perception's sake*. Threptic activities, then, are not the ultimate ends of nonrational animal life, even if nonhuman animals spend their lives nourishing and reproducing themselves. By nourishing themselves, animals maintain and extend their perceiving. By reproducing themselves, animals maintain and extend their (generic) perceptive forms, only in their offspring.¹³

To understand how the higher powers of (living) systems maintain and extend themselves through guiding subordinate powers, consider Aristotle's *principle of rulership*: "For in all cases, insofar as something is composed from multiple elements and becomes some one common thing, whether continuous or discrete, the ruler and the ruled are visible" (ὅσα γὰρ ἐκ πλείονων συνέστηκε καὶ γίνεται ἐν τι κοινόν, εἴτε ἐκ συνεχῶν εἴτε ἐκ διηρημένων, ἐν ἅπασιν ἐμφαίνεται τὸ ἄρχον καὶ τὸ ἀρχόμενον: *Politics* I.5, 1254a28–31).¹⁴ According to this principle, where *C* is a well-arranged

¹² On the threptic power's subordination to the perceptive power, cf. Nagel ([1972] 1980: 11); Wilkes ([1978] 1980: 345); King (2001: 46); Polansky (2007: 537; 541); Richardson (unpublished).

¹³ The guidance role of the higher life-functions (including perception) is discussed in various ways by Nagel ([1972] 1980); Nussbaum (1978: 77–78; 82); Wilkes ([1978] 1980: 345–346; 1988: 209–213; 1992: 110–111); Depew (1981: 150–151); Furth (1988: 159–160); M.L. Gill (1989b: 227); Matthews (1992: 90–91); Freeland (1994: 43–48); Whiting (2002: 171); M. Johnson (2005: 171–178); Polansky (2007: 538–545); Leunissen (2010: 59, 66); Richardson (unpublished). Cf. Avicenna, *Treatise on Love*, 218.

¹⁴ On this principle and related issues, see F. Miller (1995: 20–21); M. Johnson (2005: 237–246); Mayhew (2009). F. Miller (2013: 39–40) notes the Platonic origins of this view: see, e.g., *Republic* IV.444d; *Laws* III.689b; X.897b–d.

compound or system, one authoritative element *A* of *C* will rule *C* such that the other, subordinate elements, *S*, of *C* will be subject to *A*'s authoritative rule. *A* is authoritative within *C* by *actively guiding S*. Such guidance may – but need not – involve *A*'s issuing orders to *S*. What is essential is *A*'s aiding *S*, or facilitating *S*'s activity, in virtue of *A*'s greater power, ability, goodness, or knowledge than *S* (*Politics* I.2, 1252a31–34; VII.14, 1332b13–23). These features of *A* benefit *S* in *S*'s functioning well and performing *S*'s tasks as *S*. These features thereby confer authority on *A* over *S*. Indeed, more strongly, *A* serves as an end for *S* in virtue of *A*'s power to guide *S*.¹⁵

By actively guiding a system's subordinate element(s), the ruling element confers order and unity on the system. It is beneficial, then, for a compound or system to be arranged such that (1) subordinate elements subserve the authoritative element and (2) the authoritative element guides the subordinate elements. Such an arrangement, Aristotle says, is not only necessary, but advantageous (οὐ μόνον τῶν ἀναγκαίων ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν συμφερόντων ἔστι: *Politics* I.5, 1254a21–22). For the authoritative element – in virtue of its power, ability, goodness, or knowledge – ensures that the system functions as a whole. Accordingly, given its special role in unifying the whole, Aristotle suggests that the authoritative element can stand in, by synecdoche, for the whole system (*EN* IX.8, 1168b31–32; cf. *Politics* III.17, 1288a26–28). A compound or system's authoritative ruler thereby serves as the system's *telos* – if not absolutely (because the activity of the whole system of which the ruler is a subordinate part serves as the system's unqualified *telos*), then at least relative to the system's other components.

Multiple examples from Aristotle bear out these points. I proceed by first considering more despotic ruler/ruled relationships. In such relationships, the ruler benefits the ruled at best incidentally. From there, I consider more kingly and political ruler/ruled relationships, in which the ruler increasingly benefits the ruled for the ruled's own sake.

(1) **Living Organisms.** The body exists for the sake of the soul and its functions. The soul, in turn, uses the body and properly exercises a kind of despotic, yet beneficial, rule over it (*Topics* V.1, 128b18; *DA* II.1; *Politics* I.5, 1254a34–36; b4–5; b7–8; *Protrepticus* 6, 38.14/B34; 7, 41.15–20/B59).

¹⁵ Within compounds or systems, I take Aristotle to hold, *A* (actively) guides *S* when *S* is for the sake of *A*. This claim, however, does not imply that all things that are teleologically subordinated to other things must be actively guided by their ends. For not all instances of teleological subordination occur within compounds or systems. The art of building is for the sake of the house; but the art and the house do not thereby form a compound.

In ruling the body, however, the soul nevertheless guides the body by actively directing the body's material replenishment (*DA* II.4). By doing so, the soul ultimately maintains and extends its own functioning. For the body is a tool for the soul's activities (*DA* I.3, 407b24–26; cf. *DA* II.1, 412b10–413a10; *PA* I.1, 642a9–13).

Plant life offers a clear case of such governance. The *threptikon* – the sole function of plant life – is authoritative in plant souls, and in just this way. In a plant, the *threptikon* is authoritative over the plant's body, which subserves the plant's threptic powers, just as these threptic powers preserve that body and authoritatively guide its material replenishment.

(2) ***The Household.*** Aristotle believes that natural teleological relationships serve as models for other ruler/ruled relationships. Art imitates nature (*Physics* II.2, 194a21–22; II.8, 199a15–17). Thus, the soul's despotic relationship to the body serves as a model for the relationship between master and slave (*Politics* I.5, 1254b4–5). According to Aristotle, the natural slave subserves, and counts as “part” of, the master (*EN* V.6, 1134b9–12). The slave labors for the master's sake and promotes the master's various projects and ends. Yet the master does not just passively receive the slave's service. After all, the master is a useful figure in the life of the slave. The master advantageously guides his slave in various ways (*Politics* I.6, 1255b4–9). The master, for instance, cultivates a certain virtue in the slave (*Politics* I.13, 1260b2–4). For all that, the master guides his slave to ensure that his slave will continue to be of service to him and to his ends. The slave benefits only incidentally (*Politics* III.6, 1278b32–37).

(3) ***The Environment.*** A similar relationship holds, Aristotle suggests, between nonhuman animals and human beings. Nonhuman animals (in some way) exist for the sake of human beings (*Politics* I.8, 1256b15–22). Yet the latter's rule over the former – made possible by the human possession of reason – benefits the former by taming and preserving them (*Politics* I.5, 1254b10–13). Still, feeding and tending animals advances the interests of those who domesticate animals with an eye for food, clothing, and tools (*Politics* I.8, 1256b15–20).

(4) ***Political Communities.*** In the human soul, Aristotle insists, reason naturally rules nonrational desire with a kind of political and kingly rule (*Politics* I.5, 1254b5–6). This natural teleological relationship within the human soul serves, in turn, as a model for various interpersonal relationships. In a monarchy, for instance, a king's subjects are teleologically subordinate to the king. The subjects delimit their behavior with an

eye to the king's authority, and they grant the king due honor by recognizing his rule. Further, subjects guard their kings (*Politics* III.14, 1285a25–29; V.10, 1311a7). Kingly rule over subjects, however, differs in kind from the master's despotic rule over the slave (or the human being's rule over the nonrational animal). Slavery only incidentally benefits the slave: it benefits the slave merely instrumentally for the sake of the master. Kingly rule, by contrast, benefits the subject, *both* for the subject's own benefit *and* for the sake of the king (*Politics* III.6, 1278b32–1279a2; *EN* VIII.10, 1160b24–27). Through ruling with an eye to the common good, then, kings guide their subjects in a fuller way. Kings benefit their subjects intrinsically (*EN* VIII.11, 1161a10–19). Yet kings, if there be any true ones, are not teleologically subordinate to their subjects (*Politics* III.13, 1284b25–34; III.17, 1288a15–29).

Kings benefit their subjects, in part, intrinsically; but kings do so for the sake of realizing their activities as kings. Hence, for a king, the subjects are not ends, full stop and without qualification. Instead, the subjects still ultimately subserve the king, who, in relation to his subjects, has more the status of an end within the kingdom.

(5) **The Family.** In *EE* VIII.3, Aristotle initially denies that a father and son are related as a ruler and subject, at least not strictly speaking. Yet he later describes this relationship as, somehow, a ruler/subject and benefactor/beneficiary relationship (*EE* VII.10, 1242a32). The father exercises a kind of kingly rule over the son (*EN* VIII.10, 1160b24–25; *Politics* I.12, 1259b10–11). So, the son subserves – is teleologically subordinate to – the father: the son is “part” of the father (*EN* V.6, 1134b9–12). As an immature human being, he exists for the sake of attaining his father's mature adult form (*Metaphysics* Θ.8, 1050a5–10). Fathers, however, care for and benefit their sons by preserving and educating them (*EN* VIII.10, 1160b24–25; *EE* VII.3, 1238b22–25). Fathers offer such authoritative guidance in virtue of their affection, age, and accompanying experience and developed rationality (*Politics* I.12, 1259b10–17; *EN* I.13, 1103a2–3). Fathers do so for the sake, at least in part, of enabling sons to attain adulthood and embody the father's own form.

Likewise, Aristotle claims that husbands properly exercise kingly rule over their wives. On Aristotle's patriarchal view, women exercise deliberation, but their deliberative capacities are, in some sense, “without authority” (ἀκυρον: *Politics* I.13, 1260a12–14). As authoritatively rational, good husbands deliberate on behalf of their wives and help educate their wives. Husbands thereby guide their wives. With their reasoning abilities so

aided, Aristotle thinks, wives are in a position to maintain and extend the aims of their authoritative husbands within the family (and so, maintain and extend the aims of the household as such). Under their husbands' guidance, wives assist their husbands in household management (*Politics* III.4, 1277b24–25).

In addressing these examples, I do not mean to say that they are all equally plausible or unobjectionable. On the contrary, Aristotle goes astray to the extent he applies the principle of rulership in interpersonal contexts that are disanalogous with biological ones. A key worry: Aristotle evidently identifies ruled animals and human beings as subordinate “parts” of their rulers. To the extent he does so, however, Aristotle risks having to deny that the ruled are natural substances in their own right.¹⁶ Moreover, some of Aristotle's specific applications of the principle of rulership rest on worrisome empirical claims, e.g., about the deficient reasoning capacities of adult women. To address these worries, Aristotle would have to revise – and further attenuate – his interpersonal teleology. How Aristotle should do so lies outside the scope of this work. Still, the examples that I have explored reveal a general model of teleological relations within systems that appears throughout Aristotle. These examples emphasize the useful guiding role that an authoritative element plays within a whole. They show that it would be very strange if Aristotle were ever to affirm that a living system's authoritative function were altogether useless and unable to guide the system's subordinate functions.

For the elements of living systems, then, we can take two perspectives on the teleological relation that holds between some subject element(s) *S* and the authoritative guiding end-function *A*. The steep ascent, Aristotle says elsewhere, is in some sense identical to the steep descent (*Physics* III.3, 202a18–20). The same holds for the road from Thebes to Athens and the road from Athens to Thebes (202b13–14). Likewise, a subject's teleological relation to its authoritative end is describable in bottom-up or top-down terms. The bottom-up perspective emphasizes the subject's subservience to the end. The top-down perspective, by contrast, highlights the authoritative end's guidance for its subject. These two perspectives, however, are consistent and mutually entailing.

Suppose that, within a system, a subordinate element subserves an authoritative element. And suppose that the latter guides and facilitates the former. In such cases, we might wonder how to determine which element is subservient and which is authoritative.

¹⁶ See M. Johnson (2005: 242–246).

As intimated in [Section 4.1](#), however, Aristotle's remarks on the separability of life-functions provide some guidance. Threptic functions, when not coinstantiated with perceptive functions, persist in furthering vegetative life. When threptic functions are coinstantiated with perceptive functions, however, the former further perceptive life. From such phenomena, I take it, Aristotle infers perception's authoritative over nutrition. In such cases, perception shows an ability to co-opt threptic functioning – an ability that nutrition lacks. Nutrition and reproduction, in turn, are receptive to being co-opted for perceptive ends. So, authoritative can be naturalized, as it were, in terms of the ruling element's asymmetric capacity to co-opt the subordinate's activities for the ruler's ends.

These points cohere with the claim, which I also attributed to Aristotle in [Section 4.1](#), that subordinates (*qua* subordinate) approximate what is authoritative. When a subordinate *S* approximates some authoritative element *A*, *A* shows greater activity, responsiveness, and freedom within its surroundings than *S* does. *A* thereby shows a greater capacity to co-opt *S* for *A*, and *S* shows a greater receptivity to being so co-opted. For in these cases, *A* shows more of the features in virtue of which a ruler is properly identifiable as authoritative, viz., a greater power, ability, sovereignty, goodness, and/or knowledge than the ruled. The features of *A* that *S* approximates are the features in respect of which *S* falls short of *A*, and in virtue of which *A* can guide and benefit *S*.

To sum up: when Aristotle portrays the *threptikon* as a kind of artisan working for the *aisthêtikon*, Aristotle articulates one – evident – way in which the *threptikon* is for the *aisthêtikon*'s sake. Yet when Aristotle explains how the *aisthêtikon* guides the *threptikon*, Aristotle articulates another way in which the *threptikon* is for the *aisthêtikon*'s sake, and in which perception is a *higher or more complete (or more final) end* than threptic activity. The *aisthêtikon* provides for the *threptikon* so that the *threptikon* will keep on furthering the *aisthêtikon*'s aims. In co-opting the *threptikon* for its own ends of perceiving, desiring, and moving from place to place, and in guiding the animal toward ways of satisfying its threptic needs, the *aisthêtikon* shows itself to be *more authoritative* than the *threptikon*.¹⁷

For some ends, then, offering such active guidance contributes to that end's *being* an end. Perhaps not all ends must actively guide. Again,

¹⁷ For intimations of the subservience/guidance distinction in Plato, consider the relationship that obtains between spirit (reason's obedient ally) and reason (which rules the soul and guides spirit aright) in the *Republic* (e.g., at IV.441e4–6). Cf. *Phaedrus* 246a–b and 253d–e (where Socrates' myth represents spirit as an obedient white horse and reason as a guiding charioteer).

Aristotle's remarks on rulership pertain only to the ends of compound systems. But the authoritative function of a living system serves as an end by actively guiding that system (and the system's lower functions). By doing so in accordance with the "nature does nothing in vain" principle, the authoritative function prevents itself from becoming a useless appendage to, or needless obstruction for, the organism that possesses it. On the contrary, by providing active guidance, the authoritative function both (1) secures the conditions that maintain and extend its exercise as fully as possible, and (2) ensures the persistence and good functioning of the whole system to which it belongs.

Once more, Aristotle's political analogies are useful. A deviant political regime's authoritative element seeks its own private advantage at the expense of its subordinate elements, which subserve the authoritative element, but receive no reciprocal benefits. A correct, well-ordered regime's authoritative element, by contrast, attends to all citizens and secures the regime's common advantage (*Politics* III.6, 1279a16–21; III.7, 1279a28–31). Similarly, in a well-functioning soul, the authoritative function is not simply subserved by its subordinates, which receive no guidance in return. Instead, by guiding the lower functions, the authoritative function secures the biological analogue of the whole organism's common advantage. The authoritative function thereby constitutes part of, and is thereby primarily responsible for, a living system marked by wholeness, determinacy, good order, and functional integrity.¹⁸ (Note that even in the "despotic," but natural, relationship that obtains between soul and body, master and slave, the relationship is mutually beneficial [*Politics* I.2, 1252a34; I.5, 1254b4–9; I.6, 1255b4–15]. In such a relationship, the authoritative ruling element still benefits the subordinate, if incidentally [*Politics* III.6, 1278b32–37]. In the corrupt despotic or tyrannical political regime, by contrast, the ruling element – contrary to nature – fails to benefit the subordinate at all. Instead, this element solely benefits itself [*Politics* III.6, 1279a17–21; III.17, 1287b37–41]).

To conclude this section, I note one apparent exception to the thought that a compound's authoritative element actively guides the system's lower elements. This is god's relation to the rest of the cosmos. According to *Metaphysics* Λ.10, 1075a11–19 (see [Section 2.4](#)), god's status in the cosmos is roughly analogous to the general's status in an army. Yet while god is authoritative in the cosmos, and in some way a *telos*, god does not provide

¹⁸ On how the parts and powers of functional systems are internally arranged so as to provide mutual support for the whole system, see Irwin (2007: section 75).

any obvious authoritative guidance to other beings in the cosmos. God is only a nonordering ruler (οὐ . . . ἐπιτακτικῶς ἄρχων ὁ θεός: *EE* VIII.3, 1249b13–14).

In reply, I note that god, as unqualifiedly immortal, is unique in the cosmos in being wholly self-sufficient. God exists separately himself by himself. So, for Aristotle, god's activity in no way depends on the activity of anything else in the cosmos. God is not an ordering ruler, Aristotle says, "since he is in need of nothing" (ἐπεὶ κεῖνός γε οὐθενὸς δεῖται: *EE* VIII.3, 1249b16). God has no need to issue orders because nothing hinges (for god) on god's active guidance. Not so for the general, who does issue orders. For the general's success in realizing his military strategies does depend on his troops. Thus, god's authoritative relation to the cosmos differs in kind from the general's, and from the authoritative guiding elements of the other compounds that Aristotle examines. Aristotle's military analogy, then, is suggestive, but crucially limited. Since god is not subject to change, the teleological relations obtaining between god and the rest of the cosmos work quite differently from those that obtain elsewhere – especially in perishable living organisms. The authoritative elements of such compounds *do* depend on subordinates. Hence, the authoritative elements must actively guide these subordinates to maintain the optimal unity and active functioning of the compounds of which the authoritative elements are parts.

4.4 “Living by” an Authoritative Function and Living Well

For Aristotle, an organism's authoritative function has a special place in that organism's life. An organism is *especially identifiable* by reference to its authoritative function, which specially characterizes that organism's way of life. The authoritative functions of plants and animals distinguish, define, or characterize the kinds of lives these organisms lead. So, per *EN* I.7, the plant leads “the nutritive and growth-oriented life”; the animal leads a “certain perceptive” life. These authoritative functions, however, are simultaneously useful, either directly or through providing guidance, in *preserving* plants and animals *as* plants and animals. Thus, *qua* guiding, the authoritative functions simultaneously provide the useful *means* by which plants and animals maintain themselves.¹⁹

¹⁹ See M. L. Gill (1989b: 219–227); Nussbaum (1978: 82); Polansky (2007: 218). For a modern development, see Jonas ([1966] 2001: 106): “[S]uch ‘means’ of survival as perception and emotion are never to be judged as means merely, but also as qualities of the life to be preserved and therefore as aspects of the end. It is one of the paradoxes of life that it employs means which modify the end

An organism's authoritative function is, in other words, the function *by which* that organism lives – and in two senses. Date palms, ivy sprigs, and roses *live by* the *threptikon* – the sole and authoritative power within plant life. Such plants display their form of life by nourishing and reproducing themselves. Such activity, however, is also the means by which such plants maintain themselves as living. Nonhuman animals, in turn, *live by* the *aisthêtikon*. Crocodiles, elephants, and orangutans display their distinctively animal form of life by perceiving. At the same time, by actively guiding such animals in satisfying their basic threptic needs, perception is also a useful means for their self-maintenance.

Thus, while plants and some lower animals lack even the power of imagination (an aspect of the *aisthêtikon*), Aristotle insists, other animals “live by this alone” (τὰ δὲ ταύτη μόνῃ ζῶσιν: *DA* II.3, 415a10–11). After recounting how perception belongs to all animals and how memory arises from repeated perception, Aristotle writes, “The [animals] other [than human beings] live by appearances and memories” (ταῖς φαντασίαις ζῆ καὶ ταῖς μνήμας: *Metaphysics* A.1, 980b25–27).²⁰ Highlighting the *aisthêtikon*'s desiderative aspects, Aristotle holds that animals “live by desire” (τῇ ὀρέξει ζῆ: *EE* II.8, 1224a27). Similarly, *Problems* XXX.12's Aristotelian author proposes that animals “live by desire and spirit and appetite” (ζῆ . . . ὀρέξει καὶ θυμῷ καὶ ἐπιθυμίᾳ: 956b36).²¹ In each instance, the text uses the Greek instrumental dative case to refer to the perceptive powers by which animals live.

Recall *EN* I.7's remarks on how living organisms live well: an organism attains its good in living by its authoritative function. An organism's exercising its authoritative function well enables that organism, in some way, to approximate the divine, which Aristotle (somehow) takes as a standard, or a sign, of living well. Plants (by exercising their threptic functions) and nonhuman animals (by exercising their perceptive

and themselves become part of it. The feeling animal strives to preserve itself as a feeling, not just a metabolizing entity, i.e., it strives to continue the very activity of feeling: the perceiving animal strives to preserve itself as a perceiving entity – and so on. Without these faculties there would be much less to preserve, and this *less* of what is to be preserved is the same as the *less* wherewith it is preserved.”

²⁰ Presumably, Aristotle here means those animals that at least possess the power for memory. Yet not all do: see *An. Post* II.19, 99b35–100a2.

²¹ Aristotle uses “live by” in related senses. For instance, the great and small pie “live by hunting (θηρεύοντα ζῆ) insects” (*HA* VIII.3, 593a3–5, ROT; cf. *PA* IV.12, 693a19–21 on long-beaked swamp-dwelling birds). These passages offer a different, though related, sense of “live by.” Such birds reveal their distinctive *bioi* in how they feed themselves (e.g., by eating insects or smaller animals). Yet how these birds feed themselves is simultaneously the means by which they persist in exercising their distinctive *bioi*.

functions to guide their self-nutrition and reproduction) “share in the eternal and divine as far as they can” (τοῦ αἰεὶ καὶ τοῦ θεοῦ μετέχουσιν ἢ δύνανται: *DA* II.4, 415a29–415b1; cf. *GA* II.1, 731b24ff). So, what does it mean for something to share in *the divine*? How does exercising an authoritative function conduce to an organism’s wellbeing?

4.5 Divine Approximation, Persistence and Activity, and the Good

To understand Aristotle’s views on approximating divinity, consider Aristotle’s account of god. In [Section 2.4](#), I briefly discussed this divinity and its noetic activity (as *Metaphysics* Λ.9 describes it). Here, I note, for Aristotle, god is a living being (*DA* I.1, 402b7). As that being “whose being (οὐσία) [is] activity (ἐνέργεια)” (*Metaphysics* Λ.6, 1071b20; Λ.7, 1072a26), however, god lacks the *passivity* to be affected, changed, or injured (*DC* I.9, 279a20ff; *Topics* II.2, 109b33–35). Instead, god belongs to the class of *immortal* living beings (*Topics* IV.2, 122b12–14; V.1, 128b19–20). And unlike mortal beings, god necessarily exists (*Metaphysics* Λ.7, 1072b10–14). Thus, “[L]ife and duration continuous and eternal (ζωὴ καὶ αἰὼν συνεχῆς καὶ ἀτρεῖτος) belong to god, for this [is] god” (*Metaphysics* Λ.7, 1072b29–30; cf. *DC* II.3, 286a9). In sum, the divine is marked by its eternal, ungenerated, indestructible, self-sufficient, and secure mode of being (cf. *PA* I.5, 644b22–26; *Metaphysics* N.4, 1091b16–21).

Therefore, for something (mortal) to approximate the divine is for that entity to take on aspects of this eternally active, stable, indestructible way of being, so far as possible within the constraints of that entity’s nature. Such is the force of Aristotle’s references to the ways in which plants and animals approximate divinity in *DA* II.4 and *GA* II.1: such organisms approximate the divine, at least in part, by reproducing and preserving their forms. This conception of divine approximation appears elsewhere. Aristotle’s god, the Prime Mover, serves as the cosmos’ “unmoved and eternal” source of ongoing movement (*GC* II.10, 337a17–20; cf. *Physics* VIII.6; *EE* VIII.2, 1248a26; *MA* 4, 699b32ff). *Metaphysics* Λ.7 appeals to god’s eternally active mode of life to explain how god serves as a mover. On this account, the Prime Mover moves as an object of love (ὡς ἐρώμενον), and the first heaven, out of desire for god’s eternal activity, adopts a circular orbit (1072b1–10).²² Circular motion imitates god’s completeness because such motion is perpetual, ongoing, lacking both beginning and end. Such

²² On the Prime Mover as final cause, see Kahn (1985); G. Lear (2004: 80–85).

motion approximates divine eternity, stability, self-sufficiency, and indestructibility. The object moved “in [a] circle alone [is] continuous so that it always [is] continuous with itself” (*GC* II.10, 337a30–31).

For something to approximate divinity, then, is not necessarily for something to *copy* the divine. In the case of the first heaven’s circular motion, the first heaven does not do exactly what god does. Instead, the first heaven does something *like* what god does – viz., engage in a self-sufficient, enclosed, quasi-eternal activity.²³ Theophrastus explains this point in his own *Metaphysics*. The Prime Mover, for instance, is unmoved. But celestial bodies do not appropriately approximate the Prime Mover by remaining immobile (*V*.7b23–8a2). A similar point holds for plants and animals. God stays securely active in eternally persistent thinking without ever needing to eat or reproduce. Yet *qua* mortals, plants and animals cannot share in the divine – i.e., attain some semblance of such eternal life – without nourishing or reproducing themselves. On the contrary, organisms and natural processes share in the divine only *as far as they can* – in a way proper to them as those organisms and processes, and within the constraints of mortality.²⁴ An organism’s natural powers and essential limitations, then, shape and define how that organism fittingly approximates the divine.²⁵

My account of divine approximation has highlighted stable, indestructible persistence and eternal activity as central features of divine being. Yet Aristotle also highlights cognition as essential to god. God’s life, after all, is thinking thinking thinking – and it is the best kind of life. As Allan Gotthelf notes, however, we can ask a question about god: “Is his life best because it involves (is constituted by) the exercise of reason – or is the exercise of reason best because it embodies certain features more definitive of bestness?”²⁶ Following Gotthelf, I take it that Aristotle holds the latter view. God’s thinking, in other words, is the best kind of activity because god’s thinking is, of all activities, most securely self-persisting and fully eternally active. God’s thinking is uniquely free from materiality, and thus free from the prospect of disintegration. Free from any passivity, it is always actively at work, always alive.

One can restate some of these points about divine approximation as follows. Being for living organisms is living (*DA* II.4, 415b13), and living has

²³ As Aubenque (1963: 81) points out, talk of *X*’s approximating *Y* – becoming like, but not actually becoming – highlights *X*’s separation and difference from *Y*.

²⁴ For Diotima, mortal nature seeks to partake in immortality κατά τὸ δυνατόν (Plato, *Symposium* 207d1). For Aristotle, organisms share in the eternal and divine ἡ δύναται (*DA* II.4, 415a29–b1) and καθ’ ὃν ἐνδέχεται τρόπον (*GA* II.1, 731b32–33).

²⁵ Cf. *DC* II.12, 292a19–b13. ²⁶ Gotthelf ([1988] 2012: 58).

the various forms outlined in *DA* II.2–3. In living, organisms are actively at work being what they are. God, however, is that being that is always active as what it is: again, god’s being is activity. Organisms, then, imitate god by living, as far as possible, *as* the kinds of life-forms they are. They immortalize themselves in exercising their life-functions as actively as they can. Approximating the divine, therefore, is not some separate goal for, e.g., plants and animals, that somehow stands over and above, or in tension with, their living as such organisms. Instead, it just is their living *as* plants and animals – in a maximally complete, stable, self-maintaining way.²⁷

To approximate the divine is to display something of the quality of god’s way of life, to show something of god’s special degree of activity. Yet *qua* immortal, god is active, not for a fleeting moment, or a short time, but *always*. Hence, to approximate the divine is simultaneously to show something of god’s self-sufficient persistence and unified indestructibility. For the mortal to approximate the divine as far as possible, then, is for the mortal to be active as fully as possible, and over the widest temporal span mortal nature permits, maintaining stable unity in the face of ever-present threats of internal and external disintegration.

Aristotle understands (1) *approximating the divine as an X* in terms of (2) *fully persisting and being active as an X*. Aristotle also links (2) *fully persisting and being active as an X* and (3) *living well, benefitting, and attaining the good as an X*. Thus, as a general principle, Aristotle holds, being is better than not being, and living better than nonliving (*GC* II.10, 336b28–29; *GA* II.1, 731b28–31). Similarly, for functional kinds, including living organisms, “the good and the well seem to be in the function” (ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ δοκεῖ τὰγαθὸν εἶναι καὶ τὸ εὖ: *EN* I.7, 1097b27; cf. *EE* II.1). In his natural teleology, Aristotle identifies a living organism’s good as its full persistence and activity as that kind of organism. “Nature makes nothing in vain,” Aristotle writes, “but in all cases looking toward the best for each [organism] among the possibilities, preserving the peculiar being of each and its essence” (διασώζουσιν ἐκάστου τὴν ἰδίαν οὐσίαν καὶ τὸ τί ἦν αὐτῷ εἶναι: *IA* 8, 708a9–12). Likewise, Aristotle insists, “the good of each, at any rate, preserves each” (τὸ γὰρ ἐκάστου ἀγαθὸν σῶζει ἐκάστον: *Politics* II.2, 1261b9; cf. Plato, *Republic* X.608e4).²⁸

²⁷ Kosman (1969: 60) puts it well: “Beings therefore imitate divinity in being, acting out, what they are; *imitatio dei* consists in striving not to be God, but to be one’s self, to emulate that being who is totally active, i.e., who totally is what he is.” Cf. Gotthelf ([1988] 2012: 58–59) and Kosman (2013: 85). Aquinas may have such a conception in mind in *Summa Theologica* I.6.1: “All things, by desiring their own perfection, desire God Himself.”

²⁸ Cf. Alexander of Aphrodisias: “[T]he perfection of each thing is in every case its good (*agathon*), and in its good each thing has both its being (*to einai*) and its preservation” (*On Aristotle’s Metaphysics* I,

Hence, through a kind of transitivity, Aristotle links (1) *approximating the divine as an X* and (3) *living well, benefitting, and attaining the good as an X*. For god has “the best and most self-sufficient life” (τὴν ἀρίστην . . . ζῶην καὶ τὴν αὐταρκεστάτην: *DC* I.9, 279a21–22), “living, eternal, best” (*Metaphysics* Λ.7, 1072b26–30). In sum, Aristotle’s *general account of the good for living organisms* holds that living organisms attain their good by approximating the divine as what they are, a task that they accomplish by fully maintaining themselves and actively living as what they are.

Living organisms all have the power to nourish and reproduce themselves. Accordingly, *all* natural beings have a share of the divine (*EN* VII.13, 1153b32). Every organism thereby shares in the divine in some *absolute* sense (i.e., simply by being alive). Not every organism, however, shares in the divine in some *relative* sense (i.e., in leading a life of some high degree of activity). On the contrary, different organisms share in the divine to varying degrees (*PA* II.10, 655b37ff). Spanish moss shares in the divine less fully than slugs, and slugs less fully than chimpanzees. Given the full extent to which human beings share in the divine, Aristotle denies that either plants or animals can be *eudaimôn* (*EN* I.9, 1099b32–1100a1; *EE* I.7, 1217a24–29). True, plants attain their good nourishing themselves and reproducing, which is good for them. And when plants nourish and reproduce themselves fully and well, they approximate divinity as far as possible for plants. Yet their limited range of activity severely attenuates how good their life is. Plants and rudimentary animals are better off than rocks (cf. *GA* I.23, 731a29–b8), but they ultimately lack a robust form of wellbeing. They approximate divinity to some extent, just by engaging in life-sustaining activity. Their limited range of activity prevents them, however, from participating in the maximally active kind of living for which Aristotle reserves *eudaimonia*.

One can meaningfully question what is so good about persistence and activity. This sort of “open question” objection against Aristotle’s account of goodness, however, will also apply to *any* attempt to define goodness. Absent any specific objections to Aristotle’s view, it would be arbitrary to single out Aristotle’s account.²⁹ Moreover, accounting for goodness for *X* in terms of persistence and activity (as opposed to, say, *X*’s destruction,

1.6–8; trans. Dooley). See also Gotthelf ([1988] 2012: 53–55); Lennox ([1985] 2001: 136–137); and Mirus (2004).

²⁹ For this objection against naturalist accounts of goodness, see Moore ([1903] 1993). In reply, see Frankena (1939); Irwin (2009: sections 1256–1257). On the general viability of Aristotelian conceptions of the good, see also Irwin (2009: ch. 94).

disintegration, unrealized potential, incapacity, malfunctioning, and the like) does a better job of explaining, and cohering with, the appearances where goodness is concerned. Aristotle should say more to defend his view. Yet for my interpretive purposes, it suffices that this account accords with reputable beliefs about persistence, activity, life, goodness, and benefit.

The Utility Question Restated – and How Not to Address It

5.1 From Perception to Contemplative *Nous* – and the Utility Question

The moral of [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) is that living organisms' authoritative functions contribute crucially to their good. An organism's authoritative function is, in some way, its ultimate end and the function by which it lives in the twin senses articulated. The thought that an organism's authoritative function constitutes its ultimate end, however, recalls Aristotle's views on contemplation and the human good explored earlier. As [Chapter 2](#) argued, Aristotle thinks that contemplation is, in some sense, an ultimate end for human beings, teleologically superior even to practical reasoning. To reach this conclusion, we saw, Aristotle appeals, in a certain way, to contemplation's uselessness: contemplation is an ultimate end because it is useless for the sake of any potentially higher monistic ends (see [Section 2.5](#)). Having examined Aristotle on the whole pyramid of life-functions, however, we can discern other, complementary reasons for identifying contemplation as an ultimate end. These reasons appeal to the relationship that holds between lower functions and contemplation itself.

First, the human soul's lower functions *approximate contemplation in activity* (viz., to assimilate forms). Again, the *threptikon* approximates the *aisthêtikon* in its range of ability to assimilate its objects *qua* what those objects are (see [Section 4.1](#)). So too, the *aisthêtikon* similarly approximates *nous*, both practical and contemplative. Our pleasure in using our senses, Aristotle holds, is a sign of our higher, more comprehensive desire to understand (*Metaphysics* A.1, 980a21–27). Whereas the *aisthêtikon* assimilates the perceptual form of sensible particulars, *nous* assimilates universals from what is perceived, and is thereby capable of cognizing all things (*DA* III.4, 429a13–b9). Further, *nous* grasps universals through a process of repeated perception, memory, and experience (*An. Post.* II.19).

Practical *nous* is a kind of intellect, and like contemplative *nous*, its function is to grasp the truth – specifically, the truth about what should be desired and pursued in one’s circumstances (*EN* VI.2, 1139a26–31). Yet practical *nous*, whose proper objects are subject to change, grasps truth less completely and less precisely than contemplative *nous*, whose objects are enduring and more knowable.¹ Further, practical *nous* maintains a close tie to perception: practical *nous* is, or involves, a kind of situational perception, an ability to discern correct choices within one’s circumstances (*EN* II.9, 1109b18–23; IV.5, 1126b2–4). Thus, contemplative *nous* can more completely assimilate universals than practical *nous* can. Practical *nous* thereby approximates contemplative *nous*.²

Second, the human soul’s lower functions are *instrumentally subordinated* to contemplation. Human thinking depends on lower life-functions. Thinking requires, for instance, perception and imagination (*DA* I.1, 403a8–10; III.7, 431a14–17; III.8, 432a8–9). Just as perception requires a living body, then, the same holds for thinking (cf. *EN* X.7, 1177a28–29; X.8, 1178a23–26; 1178b33–35).³ A living body, however, requires threptic maintenance. The nutritive and perceptive powers thus subserve thinking. As discussed in [Section 2.3](#), one power for thinking, practical *nous*, is instrumental for the sake of contemplative *nous*: the former arranges affairs conducive to the latter’s free exercise (*EN* VI.13; *MM* 1.34). Consequently, all functions of the human soul are instrumentally subordinate to contemplation.

In these ways, the human soul’s various powers are for the sake of contemplation. Aristotle also thinks that contemplation is the ultimate end of rational action. And contemplation’s ultimacy as a power within the soul provides part of the basis for contemplation’s ultimacy as an end of rational action. But why should the way in which one biological life-function, or part of soul, is for the sake of another have anything to do with how one rational action is for the sake of another?

Aristotle briefly addresses this matter in *Politics* VII.14, which explicitly compares the hierarchical organization of the human soul’s powers (on the

¹ Following G. Lear (2004: ch. 5).

² *DC* II.12, 292b2–8 ranks living organisms according to their relative degree of activity. At the top are human beings (as having πλείστα πράξεις and known for πολλὰ πράττειν), then animals (as performing ἐλάττους), and finally plants (with μικρά τις καὶ μία ἴσως). On how lower functions approximate contemplation, cf. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 186–197, discussed well by Depew (1981: 147–152). Cf. Diamond (2015). On how lower functions approximate contemplation in assimilating form, see Kosman (1992: 356–357).

³ See Whiting (1986: 82–85); Wedin (1988: ch. 4); Modrak (1991, esp. 759–760); M. Frede (1992: 105–106).

one hand) and the rational actions constitutive of a human life (on the other). (1) Aristotle portrays reason-responsive desire, practical intellect, and theoretical intellect as constituting an ascending hierarchy of life-functions (1333a16–30). (2) He compares the teleology of rational actions to the teleology of these three life-functions: “we claim an analogy to hold for actions, and those [actions] of what is by nature better must be more choiceworthy for those able to achieve either of all of them or two of them; for this is always most choiceworthy for each: attaining the highest” (1333a27–30). (3) He accordingly divides life into unleisure and leisure, and war and peace; he divides actions into the necessary and useful and the fine or noble (1333a30–33). (4) He insists that the former unleisured and war-like actions and parts of life, which pertain to the soul’s lower parts, are for the sake of the latter leisured actions and parts of life, which pertain to the soul’s higher parts (1333a33–36).

In this passage, Aristotle does not explicitly mention the human soul’s nutritive part, which does not, strictly speaking, act (see *EN* VI.12, 1144a9–11). But Aristotle’s linking rational teleology (on the one hand) and biofunctional teleology (on the other) is unsurprising. For rational teleology pertains to the for-the-sake-of relations among the various actions of a human life. These actions, in turn, exercise various teleologically ordered human powers. Unleisured action and war exercise various modes of nonrational desire (such as fear and daring) and are regulated by practical *nous*. But just as unleisured action and war are for the sake of leisure, nonrational desire and practical *nous* are for the sake of contemplative *nous*. Ultimately, contemplation, the most leisured activity, consists in the exercise of contemplative *nous*.⁴

Yet how well does Aristotle’s account of the human good (specifically) cohere with his account of the good for living organisms (generally)? Nature does not work in vain when plants and animals possess and exercise their respective authoritative functions. For the *threptikon* and the *aisthêtikon* play useful roles in the lives of plants and animals. These powers provide useful guidance beneficial for self-maintenance. By contrast, *theôria*, the exercise of contemplative *nous* according to *sophia*, is a useless and – at first sight – strangely inert function. Contemplation apparently offers no active guidance for lower human life-functions. Indeed, one struggles to imagine how actively understanding the cosmos’ divine and unchanging first principles and causes even could authoritatively guide such life-functions.

⁴ I thank Eric Brown for questions on these matters.

Or so it reasonably seems to many scholars. Thus, Kathleen V. Wilkes describes contemplation as a function “subverted by all but generating no feedback” – or reciprocal benefits – for subordinate functions.⁵ According to Thomas Nagel, contemplation offers no such guidance “because the best and purest employment of reason has nothing to do with daily life.”⁶ As Sarah Broadie writes, contemplation “can make no practical contribution to anything at all, not even its *own* maintenance. This impracticality is, in a way, *theōria*’s own worst enemy in the context of human existence.”⁷ In Jonathan Lear’s view, contemplation, portrayed by Aristotle as “an escape from the pressures of ordinary practical life,” appears to be the most “deathlike form of life.”⁸

For her part, Andrea Wilson Nightingale construes Aristotle’s conception of *theōria* as departing radically from older, Platonic conceptions:

In most of his discussions of *theoria*, Plato depicted the activity of “seeing” truth as one phase in the theoretic journey: the philosophic soul goes to the realm of reality, contemplates the Forms, and returns home to implement his theoretical knowledge in practical and political life . . . Aristotle, by contrast, completely separates theoretical contemplation from all practical endeavors, treating it as an isolated activity that is an end in itself. Of course the Aristotelian theorist must use his practical reason to organize his life around the activity of contemplation, but *theoria* itself is completely detached from *praxis* and does not provide the basis of action. Aristotle severs the connection that Plato forged between *theoria* and *praxis*, and thus has no use for the metaphor of a journey in which contemplating and acting are conceived as a continuum.⁹

On Nightingale’s reading, as for other standard readings, Aristotle dissociates contemplation from the rest of life.¹⁰ Within the human soul, as within a human life, contemplation is free, not only from approximating or instrumentally serving any functions *above* it, but also from guiding any functions *below* it.

Yet Aristotle accepts the “nature does nothing in vain” principle. If we take this principle seriously, we can reasonably wonder why human beings, on Aristotle’s view, should possess contemplative *nous* at all. For the “nature does nothing in vain” principle precludes such organisms from having useless parts and powers, which risk impeding an organism’s self-maintaining activity, thereby harming the organism. Unless

⁵ Wilkes ([1978] 1980: 346–347). ⁶ Nagel ([1972] 1980: 11–12). ⁷ Broadie (1991: 392).

⁸ J. Lear (2000: 53–54). ⁹ Nightingale (2004: 197–198).

¹⁰ Cf. Randall (1960: 93): “*Nousing* is self-contained, self-sufficient, insulated from all other functions of living, as no other power of the human organism is.”

contemplation is somehow useful for the maintenance and activity of human beings, it risks becoming merely a superfluous appendage function.

Compounding this puzzle is Aristotle's general account of the good for living organisms. On this account, an organism's authoritative function is central to its good because that function is truly *authoritative*. Besides unifying and displaying an organism's distinct way of life, it also actively guides any lower functions upon which it depends. In doing so, it thereby sustains and extends itself and the perishable system that it governs. In this way, the authoritative function enables its possessor to approximate the divine. *Prima facie*, however, contemplation lacks any authoritative guidingness. As John M. Cooper contends, "The pure intellect is not 'authoritative' in the sense of exercising control over anything."¹¹ Broadie is right: contemplation's impracticality indeed threatens to be its own worst enemy in the context of mortal human existence.

Hence, the utility question reemerges with full force. Given contemplation's uselessness, how, if at all, can contemplation be central to the human good? Is contemplation thoroughly useless in a way that generates tensions with the "nature does nothing in vain" principle, the role of authoritative functions in an organism's good, and the commitments of Aristotle's general account of the good for living organisms? Do Aristotle's ordinary teleological principles and requirements fail to apply to contemplation because contemplation is exceptionally divine and superhuman? Or can contemplation, perhaps despite initial appearances, actually be useful in some other way consistent with Aristotle's other views – including his claim that contemplation is, in some meaningful sense, useless?

Aristotle has good reason to address these issues. On the one hand, he faces external challenges. Aristotle's opponent, Isocrates, denies Aristotelian contemplation's choiceworthiness precisely on account of its uselessness (see [Section 2.5](#)). Again, such studies, Isocrates complains, "lack any useful application either to private or to public affairs"; "they do not attend us through life nor do they lend aid in what we do, but are wholly divorced from our necessities" (*Antidosis* 262; trans. Norlin). Isocrates implores his students not to devote their attention to theoretical studies that "offer no benefit in relation to life" (μηδὲν πρὸς τὸν βίον ὠφελοῦσιν: *Helen* 5). On the other hand, Aristotle has equally compelling internal reasons for addressing these issues. For Aristotle's views on contemplation's place in the human good stand in tension with key Aristotelian commitments.

¹¹ Cooper ([1975] 1986: 175), on *ENX*. Though see Cooper ([1975] 1986: 177–178) on the psychology of the *EE*.

5.2 Two Initial Responses to the Utility Question

A preliminary response to the utility question grants that contemplation, unlike perception or nutrition, is indeed useless. It also admits that an organism's possessing useless functions stands in tension with the "nature does nothing in vain" principle. But this response holds that the "nature does nothing in vain" principle is only a rough generalization that admits exceptions. Martha C. Nussbaum, for instance, observes:

It could be objected that a great many characteristic activities, especially of the higher creatures, do not contribute to self-maintenance or reproduction: the purely theoretical intellect is the most striking example. Aristotle would hold that *most* activities are somehow connected to the 'nutritive soul'; in the case of intellect, he could refuse altogether to give its purely contemplative exercise a functional account, or he could make an exception to the usual rule that functional accounts are relative to nutrition and reproduction.¹²

Such a response, however, is unsatisfying because it is, at best, *ad hoc*. As argued in [Chapters 3 and 4](#), Aristotle has general reasons to think that the authoritative function of a perishable living organism should make a guiding contribution toward that organism's self-maintenance. For these general reasons to admit of a very major exception is to raise doubts about those reasons. Further, this response cannot explain why or how living organisms should come to be burdened with a useless life-function – at least if nature does nothing in vain.

Proponents of this first response could appeal to so-called deformed kinds to challenge the "nature does nothing in vain" principle's pervasiveness throughout nature. Unlike other animals, for instance, moles have stunted sight capacities (*HA* I.8, 491b28–34; IV.8, 533a1–13). If so, perhaps Aristotle denies that nature invariably does nothing in vain, even if it usually does. Yet this reply fails for two reasons. First, the case of the mole is not a true counterexample to the "nature does nothing in vain" principle. In lacking fully developed eyes, the mole is deformed in only a qualified sense, i.e., relative to other sighted animals. The mole is not deformed in an absolute sense, i.e., relative to its own way of life. Given the mole's characteristically burrowing way of life, Aristotle can say, nature works for the best by providing moles with small, protectively covered eyes.¹³

¹² Nussbaum (1978: 82n27).

¹³ On the mole, and its qualified deformity, see Gotthelf ([1985] 2012: 230–231) and Karbowski (2012: 338–339).

Second, Aristotle thinks, contemplation is central to the human good. If so, then our possessing contemplative powers should not count as some weird quirk in nature's workings, as a deformity. Instead, such possession calls out for teleological explanation in terms of its benefits.

According to a second proposal, ultimate ends can be useful simply by giving point and structure to our lives. If we lacked such ultimate ends, and simply pursued narrowly instrumental goods, our lives would be scattered and incoherent. As Harry Frankfurt writes:

Pursuing one final end rather than another may lead a person to engage in activities that are in themselves more enjoyable. It may also lead him to live a life that is more meaningful. It will do this if it entails a richer and more fully grounded purposefulness – if, that is, the network of activity to which it gives rise has greater complexity and if it radiates more extensively within the person's life.¹⁴

Perhaps contemplation could be useful in roughly this way – by serving as an end for the soul's lower powers. As an object of subservience, perhaps contemplation usefully gives point to the human soul's lower functions and to the subordinate ends that we pursue for contemplation's sake.

In response, Aristotle does think that ultimate ends impose a certain structure on our choices, and they prevent desire from being futile and vain (*EN* I.2, 1094a18–21). But appealing to such service on contemplation's part does not answer the utility question. After all, one can run the same story to try to explain why nonhuman animals possess perception. For perception stands as the threptic power's object of subservience. In *DA* III.12, however, Aristotle shows no sign of holding that simply standing as an object of subservience is how perception is useful in relation to the *threptikon*, or why animals must possess perception lest nature work in vain in animal souls. On the contrary, *DA* III.12 explains perception's appearance in nonhuman animals by explicitly invoking its usefulness for actively guiding animals in satisfying their threptic needs. Suppose that perception simply receives the *threptikon*'s homage, so to speak, sparking the *threptikon* to activity, yet without in any way actively facilitating it. If that is all perception does for the *threptikon*, the animal could well fail to meet its needs. Moreover, *DA* III.12's focus on perception's conduciveness to meeting threptic needs is a focus that chapter shares with Aristotle's various discussions of the ways in which the other parts and powers of

¹⁴ Frankfurt ([1992] 1999: 90).

organisms usefully meet the requirements of the “nature does nothing in vain” principle. To be useful in the relevant way, then, contemplative *nous* should do more than serve as an object of subservience.

My argument, however, faces a potential reply. A nonhuman animal’s highest capacities are, at best, a human being’s lower capacities. Further, Aristotle thinks that human beings, in virtue of possessing these higher, contemplative capacities, can partake in a *eudaimonia* unavailable to nonhuman animals (*EN* X.8, 1178b24–29). Human beings can live an incomparably better kind of existence in virtue of their higher functions. Therefore, the highest human capacities might function in a human life rather differently from how the highest nonhuman animal capacities function in the lives of such animals.¹⁵ Perhaps the highest human functions can be ends without guiding any lower functions.

This response, however, does not succeed. For Aristotle considers animal perception not only in comparison with human rational capacities, but also in comparison with a plant’s vegetative functions: “Compared with being intelligent, merely to participate in touch and taste seems like nothing; but compared with plant or stone, it seems wonderful” (*GA* I.23, 731a35–b3, trans. Balme). So, Aristotle accepts the following: (1) A plant’s highest capacity is the lowest nonhuman animal capacity. (2) Nonhuman animals, in virtue of possessing these higher capacities, can be active to a degree unavailable to plants. Lacking perception, plants seem comparatively inanimate (*HA* VIII.1, 588b6–10). (3) The highest nonhuman animal capacities permit such animals to live an incomparably better, “wonderful” kind of existence.

None of the above, however, stops Aristotle from insisting that the highest nonhuman animal capacities, *qua* authoritative, must conduce to animal self-maintenance in accordance with the “nature does nothing in vain” principle. Perception provides nonhuman animals access to a (relatively) wonderful existence inaccessible to plants. Yet animals are such as to have perceptive capacities in the first place only on the condition that these capacities help sustain the whole system. By analogy, then, the highest human capacities may provide human beings access to incomparably greater wellbeing than other mortal, sublunary organisms enjoy. Yet enabling their possessors to enjoy something of god’s stability and enduring, unified persistence would stand to be just part of how a function enables a perishable organism to approximate the divine as far as possible. Hence, it would be odd for the highest nonanimal capacities to play this

¹⁵ I thank Eric Brown for this suggestion.

role, but not the highest human capacities. (I address *EN* X.7–8’s remarks on contemplation’s divinity in [Section 5.6](#).)

Aristotle’s explicit remarks on happiness’ constitutive features bear out these points. Happiness is not just activity of soul according to the best and most complete virtue. Rather, happiness is such activity in a *complete life*. Aristotle measures the completeness of life in terms of its full temporal duration – a period that presumably approximates in mortal terms god’s infinite temporal duration. Happiness, Aristotle insists, requires an agent’s adequate diachronic persistence (*EN* I.7, 1098a18–20; I.10, 1101a11–16; X.7, 1177b24–26; *EE* II.1, 1219b4–8).¹⁶ But the “nature does nothing in vain” principle requires that all of an organism’s parts and powers conduce to an organism’s living well. Therefore, contemplative *nous*, in conducing to happiness, should conduce, in part, to a complete life. So, contemplative *nous* should play some useful – actively guiding – role in human self-maintenance across time.

My argument faces another reply. Perhaps contemplative *nous* plays a useful role in the human soul parallel to the Prime Mover’s useful role in the whole cosmos. The Prime Mover is an authoritative principle and final cause. But the Prime Mover does not behave the way that, say, political rulers behave. Instead of offering guidance, the Prime Mover is useful simply by eliciting motion. Likewise, the thought goes, contemplative *nous* could be authoritative within the human soul even if it does not guide anything.

Here, my opponent can appeal to *EE* VIII.3, which might seem to portray contemplative *nous*, like the Prime Mover, as a nonimperative ruler within the human soul. I address – and reject – this reading in [Section 7.1](#). Therefore, I believe this objection finds weak textual support. But the objection makes a substantive point: the Prime Mover, at least, is authoritative in the cosmos without offering guidance. So, does anything preclude contemplative *nous* from being authoritative in the same way?

Yes. As argued in [Section 4.3](#), god is imperishable and lacking all needs. God exists himself by himself, and his thinking does not depend on any other material or psychic preconditions (such as nutrition or perception). Existing outside the realm of generation and corruption, god exists outside of nature’s bounds. Hence, god is not subject to the “nature does nothing in vain” principle and the requirements that this principle imposes on the parts and powers of perishable, sublunary substances. God, then, may well

¹⁶ G. Lear (2015) usefully emphasizes *eudaimonia*’s temporal requirements. I do not address her specific account of a complete life.

be “authoritative” in ways that perishable, sublunary substances (and their parts and powers) are not. But human contemplative *nous*, unlike god, is the power of a perishable, sublunary substance. Human contemplative *nous*, moreover, depends on lower life-functions. Hence, its possession by human beings is subject to the “nature does nothing in vain” principle.

5.3 A Deeper Response to the Utility Question: *Nous* and Nonnaturalism?

Another response to the utility question, then, denies that contemplative *nous* in human beings is, for Aristotle, a natural biological function, i.e., part of the form of a living human body. If so, perhaps the “nature does nothing in vain” principle need not govern the human possession of *nous*. And so, perhaps human beings may still “possess” contemplative *nous* (in some unusual, weak sense of possession), no matter how useless it turns out to be.

As *PA* I.1 suggests (641b5–11), *nous* is not the proper object of the science of nature. Instead, *nous* is a proper object for some other science, perhaps first philosophy or theology. Aristotle holds this view for two main reasons. First, Aristotle thinks that to understand a life-function, one must understand that function’s correlative objects (*DA* II.4, 415a20–23). To understand *nous*, then, one would have to understand *its* objects. Suppose that a natural scientist, as such, investigates *nous*’ objects. If so, Aristotle thinks, we end up with the absurdity that biology constitutes an all-encompassing master science. For if biology contemplates the first principles of the cosmos, *it* will understand everything (641a32–b4). Second, Aristotle thinks that natural science as such considers the realm of nature. What is natural is, by itself, a source of change and motion. But *nous*, whether practical or theoretical, is not such a source (cf. *DA* III.9, 432b25–433a6). So, *nous* is not natural or “a nature.” Hence, *nous* lies outside the scope of the science of nature (641b4–10).¹⁷

Aristotle holds apparently similar views in the *De Anima*. *Nous*, Aristotle says, lacks a bodily organ (*DA* III.4, 429a25–27). Whereas the *aisthêtikon* is “not without body” (οὐκ ἄνευ σώματος), *nous* is somehow “separable” (χωριστός: 429b5) from the body, perhaps existentially. To cognize all that it does – Aristotle insists, refining a view of Anaxagoras – *nous* must be “unmixed” with the body (429a18).¹⁸ The power to contemplate, then,

¹⁷ On these arguments, see Lennox (1999: 1–4). Cf. *Metaphysics* E.1, 1026a12.

¹⁸ For a succinct overview of the current debate concerning *nous*’ separability, see Cohoe (2014), who also defends the strong separability view.

perhaps exists outside nature's bounds. Unlike the natural biological functions of nutrition or perception, which natural philosophers may properly study (*DA* I.1, 403a24–28), perhaps contemplation need not be useful in human lives.¹⁹

5.4 *Nous* and Nature in *On the Parts of Animals*

The thought that human *nous* is not a natural biological function offers an initially promising way for Aristotle to address the utility question. In addressing this nonnaturalist proposal, I must touch on some of the most contested issues in Aristotle studies. I briefly argue, however, that we should resist this proposal for both textual and philosophical reasons. While fully aware of the debates that surround Aristotle's psychology, I argue that, on the most plausible reading, *nous* in human souls is a natural biological function. *Nous* and its possession by human beings remain subject to the "nature does nothing in vain" principle. Therefore, the utility question persists.

I first consider the *Parts of Animals* passages. Aristotle's remarks in *PA* I.1 are brief and programmatic, and they leave unclear exactly what type of *nous* Aristotle has in mind. Perhaps Aristotle denies only that divine thinking, Aristotle's god, is a fitting object of natural-scientific investigation. For such thinking presumably lies outside the realm of change and motion. But it is unclear that all *nous* does so. If so, Aristotle need not think that natural scientists should ignore all *nous*. Perhaps natural scientists may investigate *nous* when this power, like nutrition and perception, is instantiated by perishable human beings. *Nous* of this human sort, when realized by rational animals, would exist within nature, as part of the form of the living human body.²⁰

For if *PA* I.1 forbids the natural scientist from referring to *nous* at all in natural-scientific explanations, then Aristotle himself apparently violates his own strictures.²¹ First, the human being stands upright because this organism in a special way "shares in the divine" (μετέχει τοῦ θεοῦ). Here, such sharing involves contemplating the celestial bodies above us (*PA* II.10, 656a6–13). Second, the human body has an upright posture and hands, rather than four-footedness, because "its nature and being (τὴν φύσιν

¹⁹ Leunissen (2010: 63) describes the capacity for thinking as "not necessary for life as such and therefore not strictly speaking a biological capacity."

²⁰ M. Frede (1992: 105) suggests that the imperishable Prime Mover is the intellect that Aristotle restricts from natural-scientific investigation.

²¹ See Charlton (1987: 410–414). For similar concerns, see Lennox (1999: 4).

αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν) are divine; but [the] function of the most divine [is] to think and to be wise” (ἔργον δὲ τοῦ θειοτάτου τὸ νοεῖν καὶ φρονεῖν: *PA* IV.10, 686a28–29). As Aristotle elaborates, the organ of thought is not the brain, but the heart. An arrangement of the body in which bodily mass weighs down the heart, however, impedes thought. Therefore, an upright posture enables thought to function unencumbered. To explain the parts and posture of a human body, one must somehow refer to *nous* – which, to this extent, would seem to be part of the form of the living human body. These explanations do not highlight *nous*’ utility for other human capacities. Yet they account for certain aspects of the body in relation to *nous* and to the divine.

Assume for argument’s sake that Aristotle *methodologically* restricts natural scientists from investigating all *nous* (both divine and human). Even then, *nous* could still *be* part of nature and subject to the “nature does nothing in vain” principle. For the methodological point about restricting investigations of *nous* is consistent with the metaphysical claim that *nous* remains a natural biological function of the living human body. In *PA* I.1, Aristotle precludes natural science’s studying *nous* simply to forestall the absurdity that biology is the master science.²² Therefore, even if *nous* is not to be studied in some unqualified way by natural scientists, some *nous* could still be part of nature – in particular, part of the living human body’s form.

When Aristotle insists that the biologist will not “contemplate” (θεωρεῖσθαι) *nous* and its objects (*PA* I.1., 641b2), then, he may have a strong sense of “contemplate” in mind. Aristotle may well deny only that natural science can *provide a complete account of nous and its objects*. As Aristotle’s scientific practice suggests, Aristotle could still permit natural scientists to investigate *nous* and its objects in some weaker sense. Scientists may well *refer to nous* and its objects incidentally, when a natural-scientific account of (e.g.) human physiology requires it. So, while the investigation of *nous* in stricter senses would perhaps fall under the purview of first philosophy – given Aristotle’s methodological strictures – biology and related sciences could still study *nous* in a qualified way. If Aristotle does not distinguish between stronger and weaker ways of investigating *nous* and its objects, it is hard to see how Aristotle justifies his own reference to *nous* and its objects in *PA* II.10 and IV.10. In that case, Aristotle’s views generate problems that

²² As Caston (1996: 182) (whose account I generally follow) observes, Aristotle excludes the intellect as an object of natural-scientific study entirely on the grounds “that the *objects* of intellect would overinflate the domain of natural science. The intellect is something of a fifth wheel here.”

lie outside the scope of this study. For charity, then, I assume that Aristotle distinguishes between stronger and weaker ways of investigating *nous*. At any rate, Aristotle allows that human *nous* plays some role in explaining the natural growth and development of living human bodies. To that extent, human *nous* is a source of change and motion. And to that extent, Aristotle should (or does) allow that human *nous*, at least, lies within nature's bounds, as part of the form of the living human body.

5.5 *Nous* and Nature in *De Anima* and Problems

I turn to the *De Anima*'s views on *nous*' separability. To begin, I note, for clarity, that Aristotle's remarks at *DA* III.4, 429a25–27 concern *nous* as such. Hence, these remarks must pertain both to practical and contemplative *nous*. If so, then even practical *nous* must also be separable.²³ *Prima facie*, this would be a puzzling consequence. For as discussed in [Section 5.1](#), Aristotle closely links practical *nous* with perception, which, in turn, requires the body (*EN* II.9, 1109b18–23; IV.5, 1126b2–4).²⁴ Further, Aristotle provides general reasons for thinking that *nous* – whether contemplative or practical, and at least in human souls – depends on perception, nutrition, and the body. In the relevant *De Anima* passages, then, it is hard to see how contemplative *nous* in human beings could be existentially separable from a complex system of functions that includes nutrition and perception. Moreover, Aristotle explicitly identifies at least some *nous* – passive *nous* – as perishable (φθαρτός: *DA* III.5, 430a22–25). Such *nous* differs from the imperishable, divine thinking of Aristotle's god, the “agent intellect,” which Aristotle discusses in *DA* III.5.²⁵ At least some *nous*, like other items in the natural world, is subject to corruption. To that extent, passive *nous* would stand to be part of the natural sublunary world – presumably, as part of the living human body's form.

Therefore, we better understand Aristotle as committed to the following views: (1) human *nous*, whether contemplative or practical, is passive *nous*; (2) human *nous* *qua* passive *nous* is both perishable and part of the natural

²³ See Whiting (1986: 82).

²⁴ According to Cohoe (2014: 597), *De Anima* passages that insist upon *nous*' dependence on imagination address practical, not contemplative, thought. Hence, he suggests, perhaps contemplative *nous* is uniquely separable in some way that practical *nous* is not. But as also noted in [Section 5.1](#), *An. Post.* II.19 emphasizes perception's role in our grasping universals. And to the extent contemplative *nous* grasps universals, it requires perception.

²⁵ I recognize that the identity of *DA* III.5's “agent intellect” is subject to controversy. Again, I accept the arguments of, e.g., Alexander of Aphrodisias, Caston (1999), and Burnyeat (2008: 38) identifying this intellect as god.

world in virtue of its dependence on nutrition and perception; and (3) human *nous*, unlike nutrition and perception, is separable from the body only analytically or in account, not existentially (options that *DA* III.4, 429a10–12 explicitly countenances).²⁶ True, unlike digestion, which requires the stomach, and unlike sight, which requires the eyes, human *nous* lacks a special material bodily organ for its exercise.²⁷ To that extent, such *nous* is not subject to a natural-scientific account. For such an account of *X* refers in some way to *X*'s matter (*DA* I.1, 403a25–b9). Still, such *nous* is necessarily dependent on the body and its processes, and so, is at least necessarily embodied.²⁸ Hence, it remains part of the natural world – and a natural biological function.

On such grounds, one has good, if defeasible, reason to identify human *nous* – including contemplative *nous* – as a second-order power to use certain essentially embodied first-order cognitive abilities.²⁹ So construed, contemplative *nous* lacks a proper organ, yet it is still part of the human soul as a whole (cf. *DA* I.5, 411a27–b19). Aristotle strongly suggests that this power *is* part of that soul: it is “the portion of the soul by which the soul both knows and cognizes” (τοῦ μορίου τοῦ τῆς ψυχῆς ὃ γινώσκει τε ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ φρονεῖ: *DA* III.4, 429a10–11).³⁰ Context suggests that “the soul” here is the *human* soul, and that *nous* is a part *qua* power of that soul.

Finally, it is odd for yet another reason to read the *De Anima* as committed to contemplative *nous*' existential separability from the human body. Aristotle offers the following objection to a range of views about the relation between soul and body: “The view we have just been examining, in company with most theories about the soul, involves the following absurdity: they all join the soul to a body, or place it in a body, without adding any specification of the reason of their union, or of the bodily conditions required for it” (*DA* I.3, 407b14–17; ROT). The non-naturalist proposal faces a parallel problem. If (1) contemplative *nous* is

²⁶ Following Whiting (1986: 80–81) on point (3).

²⁷ Cohoe (2014: 596) notes that so-called common perception occurs through multiple sense modalities, and, by extension, their special organs. Common perception lacks a proper organ. Still, Aristotle never describes common perception as “separable” in any way like *nous*. Hence, Cohoe objects, when Aristotle claims that *nous* is separable, he must intend something stronger than such *nous*' simply lacking a proper organ.

In response, Aristotle denies that common perception is a sixth sense, and, hence, that there is a proper *sensory* organ for common perception (*DA* III.1, 425a14–b3). Nevertheless, Aristotle does hold that common perception possesses an organ, viz., the heart. The heart is not a proper sense organ in its own right (i.e., one that enables some sixth sense); instead, it unifies what the various special senses perceive. See *Iuv.* 1, 467b28–30; *Somn.* 2, 455a33–34 (discussed by Johnstone [2015]).

²⁸ Cf. Charlton (1987: 417); Modrak (1991: 759); Caston (2009: 329).

²⁹ As M. Frede (1992: 105–106) argues. ³⁰ Following Caston (1996: 180–181).

somehow existentially separable from nutrition and perception in human souls, and if (2) the “nature does nothing in vain” principle plays no role in explaining why human souls possess contemplative *nous*, then contemplative *nous*’ incidental conjunction with other natural human life-functions and with the human body becomes rather mysterious. In short, on the most plausible reading of the *De Anima*, *nous* – including contemplative *nous* – does not appear in human souls, and is not possessed by human beings, magically. Instead, contemplative *nous* – like nutrition, perception, and practical reason – is integral to the embodied human soul, even if such *nous* lacks a proper organ of its own.³¹

These points find support from another Aristotelian work, the *Problems*. The precise authorship of the *Problems* is a matter of controversy, though today, most scholars identify it as a later compilation that at least contains some authentically Aristotelian material and that nevertheless articulates Peripatetic views.³² According to *Problems* XXX.5, “*nous* is also among the things belonging in us by nature as an instrument” (ἐστὶ γὰρ καὶ ὁ νοῦς τῶν φύσει ἐν ἡμῖν ὥσπερ ὄργανον ὑπάρχων: 955b25–26), viz., for using other tools. Like other *natural* human endowments, e.g., the human hand, *nous* becomes increasingly effective as we grow older, and as it becomes more perfect. In comparing *nous* to the hand, the *Problems* emphasizes *nous*’ utility. For Aristotle elsewhere describes the hand as the “tool of tools” (*DA* III.8, 432a1; cf. *PA* IV.10, 687a5–b21). And like “the other natural endowments” (τὰ ἄλλα τὰ φύσει ὑπάρχοντα) that we possess, *nous* can be incapacitated (955b31–34). If *Problems* XXX.5 captures Aristotle’s commitments – and I assume that it does – then *nous* is an integral, useful aspect of the human soul, one belonging to human beings by nature. For this reason, perhaps, the Aristotelian author of the *Problems* has no worries about discussing human morphology with reference to *nous*: human beings are the wisest of animals (τῶν ζώων ὁ ἀνθρωπος φρονιμώτατος) because they have the smallest heads in proportion to the rest of their bodies (*Problems* XXX.3, 955b4–8). Thus, whether *nous* be practical or

³¹ Some appeal to fragments of the *Eudemus* to argue that Aristotle might at one point have believed in some kind of separability of our (immortal) intellect. See Hutchinson (1988: 78–79) and Gerson (2005: 51–59). The *Eudemus*, however, is a dialogue for which we have only the sketchiest of fragments. Hence, while the existing evidence suggests that the *Eudemus* somehow addresses the soul’s immortality, it provides little sign that Aristotle himself was committed to (part, or any, of) the soul’s existential separability and immortality. On the contrary, the sparse existing evidence is consistent with the view that, as a dialogue, the *Eudemus* only explores common beliefs about the soul that the *DA* addresses more scientifically.

³² On the *Problems* and its authorship, see Mayhew (2011: xvi–xix) and Bodnar (2015). As Kenny (1978: 9n1) notes, *Problems* XXX.5, 955b37 closely parallels *EE* VIII.2, 1248a29.

contemplative, the “nature does nothing in vain” principle should govern *nous*’ appearance in human souls and its possession by human beings.

5.6 *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7–8: The Separability and Divinity of *Nous*

Elsewhere, *EN* X.7–8 also seems to provide grounds for attributing some kind of nonnaturalist position to Aristotle. Here, Aristotle appears to think that contemplative *nous* is either wholly free from the requirements of the “nature does nothing in vain” principle, or else can meet these requirements in some novel way. I argue, however, that we have stronger reasons to resist attributing a nonnaturalist position to Aristotle even here.

First, consider *EN* X.8, 1178a16–25. In this passage, Aristotle says that *phronêsis* concerns the ethical virtues, which in turn concern passions and ultimately the soul/body compound. Such virtues – and their affiliated happiness – are human. The virtue of (contemplative) *nous*, by contrast, is “separated” (ἡ δὲ τοῦ νοῦ κερχωρισμένη). By implication, *sophia*, and the happiness that it confers, is divine. Once more, contemplative *nous* and its possession by human beings seem to fall outside of natural-scientific explanation.³³

But we need not read 1178a16–25 as indicating contemplative *nous*’ existential separability. For again, the relevant kind of separability at play here is more likely separability in account.³⁴ On Aristotle’s view (see [Section 2.3](#)), practical *nous* differs from contemplative *nous* on account of its proper objects. More specifically, practical *nous* concerns human goods and the regulation of reason-responsive desires that we possess in virtue of being embodied. Thus, to define practical *nous*, one must refer to the hylomorphic compound and its relevant passions. Contemplative *nous*, by contrast, has eternal, unchanging proper objects. It is not directly concerned with either human goods or the passions. Hence, contemplative *nous* is separable in account from the compound in a way that practical *nous* is not. But if that is 1178a16–25’s claim, then Aristotle makes no commitment to contemplative *nous*’ existential separability from the compound.

Meanwhile, a similar point holds for Aristotle’s earlier claim that contemplative *nous* “differs from the compound” (διαφέρει τοῦτο τοῦ συνθέτου: *EN* X.7, 1177b28–29). Instead of describing contemplative *nous* as existentially separable from the soul/body compound, however,

³³ Cooper ([1975] 1986: 174–177)

³⁴ Following Whiting (1986: 83–85).

Aristotle could simply be highlighting contemplative *nous*' comparative value and end-status. For X.7's surrounding context highlights contemplative *nous*' superlative completeness and authority *relative to* the human soul's other powers. "In power and worth," Aristotle says, "much more does it surpass all things" (1178a1–2: δυνάμει καὶ τιμιότητι πολὺ μᾶλλον πάντων ὑπερέχει). For contemplative *nous* is our "authoritative and better" (τὸ κύριον καὶ ἄμεινον) aspect (1178a2–3).³⁵

At this point, the strong nonnaturalist reader might retreat to what I call weak nonnaturalism. Unlike the strong nonnaturalist, the weak nonnaturalist allows that contemplative *nous* is an actual part of the human soul. Yet the weak nonnaturalist still resists the thought that contemplative *nous* must guide lower life-functions if it is to meet the "nature does nothing in vain" principle's constraints. On the contrary, the weak nonnaturalist holds, contemplative *nous*, just by itself, specially benefits human beings by enabling us to perform and enjoy an incomparably valuable *divine* activity. As Aristotle claims, "it is not insofar as one is human (ἢ ἀνθρωπός)" that one lives according to contemplative *nous* and enjoys the happiest life, but rather, "insofar as something divine belongs in him" (ἢ θεῖόν τι ἐν αὐτῷ ὑπάρχει: *EN* X.7, 1177b27–28). Contemplation, then, enables us "as far as possible to immortalize" ourselves (ἐφ' ὅσον ἐνδέχεται ἀθανατίζειν: 1177b33). On the weak nonnaturalist reading, nature avoids working in vain when nature supplies human beings with contemplative *nous*. For such *nous* enables us – at moments, and as far as possible – directly to transcend our less valuable humanity and fully assimilate ourselves to a more valuable divine existence.³⁶

In response, in [Section 5.2](#), I have already identified various reasons why this sort of reading is unstable. But there is more to say about the weak nonnaturalist reading.

(1) Nothing compels – and much opposes – this reading. When Aristotle advises contemplators to immortalize themselves "as far as possible," we should read this qualifier in relation to the similar qualifiers that Aristotle uses in *DA* II.4 and *GA* II.1 when he discusses the ways that plants and animals approximate the divine. Plants and animals, however, approximate the divine not by radically transcending their vegetative and perceptive modes of life (i.e., by living as something other than plants or animals). Instead, they accomplish this task by living their own proper modes of life in an intensified, self-maintaining way. Such a way of living provides *a kind*

³⁵ On *EN* X.7–8 on such authoritativeness, see [Section 7.1](#).

³⁶ For intimations of weak nonnaturalism, see Nagel ([1972] 1980: 12–13); Wilkes ([1978] 1980: 348–351); Everson (1998: 97–98); Scott (1999: 240–241); Bush (2008).

of transcendence for plants and animals. Such organisms thereby transcend the contrary tendencies of the material elements that compose them – tendencies in virtue of which these organisms face mortality. But such transcendence is, at best, a weak sort, in which these life-forms approximate god's eternal activity in, and through, their living fully as plants and animals. Such transcendence need not involve these organisms' leaving behind their essential natures altogether.³⁷

(2) Aristotle thinks that, for any living being, a divine existence is better than a mortal existence. Aristotle also thinks that gods benefit from contemplation. Yet Aristotle need not think that we benefit from the activities that gods enjoy just because these activities intrinsically benefit gods. For he need not think that whatever benefits one higher form of life must benefit another, lower form. Instead, Aristotle's tendency to define goodness and benefit in kind- and function-relative terms pervades his thinking.³⁸ "To say all existing things aim at some one good [is] not true," Aristotle claims, "for each is desirous of [its] own peculiar good, [the] eye of vision, [the] body of health, and so on" (*EE* I.8, 1218a30–33). What is good for human beings need not be so for fish (*EN* VI.7, 1141a22–23). True, god's contemplation is paradigmatically pleasant in god's life (*Metaphysics* Λ.7, 1072b16–19). Yet the pleasures proper to each animal vary according to their kind and function (*EN* X.6, 1176a3–8).

Thus, when Aristotle says that one leads the happiest life only "insofar as something divine" pertains to one's nature (*EN* X.7, 1177b27–28), we should read Aristotle as saying that we will not attain our human good insofar as we exercise capacities (such as practical *nous*) that only human beings possess. Instead, we will lead the happiest life only insofar as we exercise our highest – i.e., our most authoritative – functions. These functions, Aristotle suggests, include contemplative activities that gods also enjoy.³⁹

³⁷ Cf. Nussbaum (1990: 379–380) on "internal" and "external" transcendence (though applied to human beings).

³⁸ See Nussbaum (1986: 373–377); Bostock (2000: 197–198); M. Johnson (2005: 123–124).

³⁹ Following Whiting (1986: 89–90) and Charles (1999: 221n10). On the qualified, "as if" divinity of human contemplation in *EN* X.7–8, cf. Wedin (1988: 209–211).

Aristotle does highlight that gods enjoy contemplation; and he thinks that it follows that contemplation will, more than other activities, have the character of happiness (*EN* X.8, 1178b21–25). Aristotle does not imply, however, that contemplation will benefit us just because it benefits gods. Instead, Aristotle invokes the gods' enjoying contemplation because he thinks that shows something important about contemplation's superlative leisureliness. If, like gods, we had no pressing needs, but were capable of maximum leisure, what would we do? We would contemplate just for its own sake. Hence, contemplation, more than any other activity, shows superlative leisureliness, and hence, finality or completeness. That is one sign that contemplation is complete happiness (*EN* X.8, 1178b7–21).

(3) Confirming these points, Aristotle takes a dim view of the alleged benefits of transcending humanity in any strong way. Aristotle identifies “the good we seek” (τὸ ζητούμενον ἀγαθόν) not as the divine good, but as the *human* good (τὸ ἀνθρώπινον ἀγαθόν) (cf. *EN* I.7, 1097a15 and 1098a16; I.13, 1102a12–17).⁴⁰ Thus, we benefit only *as* human beings, not as gods: “No one chooses to have all things [at the cost of] becoming another [person] (for, even now, god has the good) but [rather as still] being whatever he is” (*EN* IX.4, 1166a20–22). Aristotle is clear: human beings do not benefit from being transformed into gods (*EN* VIII.7, 1159a6–12). Aristotle’s point here addresses only the thought that we would be better off if we were to perish and transform ourselves into divinities. Nevertheless, it counts as evidence against the claim that we benefit from transcending our nature in a strong way.

The weak nonnaturalist can respond to some of these points by arguing that Aristotle, in *EN* I.7 and for most of the treatise, is concerned with the human good. Yet perhaps Aristotle ultimately identifies the human good – a life according to ethical virtue – as only second happiest. On this reading, Aristotle turns his attention in *EN* X.7 to the superhuman good, which, as divine, is better and more fulfilling than the human good.⁴¹ Such a reading of *EN* X.7, however, conflicts with Aristotle’s explicit statements in the chapter. (1) Aristotle identifies human nature with *nous* “most of all” (μάλιστα) on the basis that a composite is (in some way) to be identified with its “authoritative and better” (τὸ κύριον καὶ ἄμεινον) aspect. (2) A life according to *nous*, Aristotle indicates, is a human being’s “own life” (τὸν αὐτοῦ βίον) and “proper” (οἰκεῖον) to human beings by nature. (3) Accordingly, Aristotle identifies a life according to *nous* as “most powerful and most pleasant” (κράτιστον καὶ ἡδιστόν) for a human being (*EN* X.7, 1177b31–1178a8). Aristotle, in other words, affirms within *EN* X.7 that he remains concerned with the human good.⁴² Hence, we have good reasons to reject the weak nonnaturalist’s view of divine approximation.⁴³

⁴⁰ Cf. Whiting (1986, 88). ⁴¹ See Bush (2008: 63–68).

⁴² Bush (2008: 68–69) recognizes these worries.

⁴³ Sedley (1999) and Annas (1999: ch. 3) explore the ethical ideal of becoming godlike with reference to Plato. Both highlight the *Theaetetus* 176a–b and *Timaeus* 90a–d as committed to the thought that we should transcend our humanity in a strong way by identifying ourselves with our divine element. See Sedley (1999: 311–312; 316–321) and Annas (1999: 53–55; 57–58). Further, both suggest that Aristotle is committed to this strong, external kind of transcendence in *EN* X.7–8. See Sedley (1999: 324–326) and Annas (1999: 63–64).

Although I lack space to address these, and other, Platonic passages, I deny that they show Plato endorsing strong, external transcendence. (1) The *Theaetetus*’ “digression” about the philosopher who flees human life is best read as criticizing an otherworldly, aloof conception of the philosopher, not as endorsing this conception. See, e.g., Rue (1993) and Stern (2008: ch. 6). At *Theaetetus* 176a–b,

EN X.7–8's claims about approximating divinity, like DA II.4's and GA II.1's similar remarks, invite an "immanent" metaphysical interpretation, which would maintain the happy coherence of Aristotle's biology, ethics, and theology. On such an interpretation, it would be *prima facie* odd for Aristotle's account of the best life to deny that the authoritative human function would actively guide and benefit lower functions. If contemplation provided such guidance, human beings, like any organisms, would approximate god's eternal activity through fully maintaining and exercising a whole system of life-functions organized around an authoritative function. Moreover, through *theôria*'s freedom and activity (at least compared with nutrition and perception), human beings would approximate god's eternal activity more completely than other life-forms.

Unless *theôria* does guide lower-level functions, however, Aristotle's effort to establish the supreme value of *theôria* appears dependent on a different view about the goodness of divine activity, one that Aristotle evidently rejects elsewhere and that is hard to defend on its own. This "external" reading of Aristotle on *theôria*'s divinity, moreover, would unhappily trichotomize his biology, ethics, and theology. Approximating divinity through reproduction and perception (which conduce to self-maintenance) would be utterly different from approximating divinity through contemplation (which would not).⁴⁴ Since plants and animals do not contemplate, their self-immortalizing activities would be

Socrates suggests that becoming godlike involves cultivating the distinctly human, this-worldly virtues of justice and piety. See Rue (1993: 89–91) and Stern (2008: 177–182); and cf. Aristotle on justice as a trait that gods lack (at EN X.8, 1178b10–12). As I argue in Section 10.4, despite his passing, Theaetetan remarks about Thales in EN VI.7, 1141b3–8, Aristotle need not identify otherworldly Thales as a model philosopher. (2) As Armstrong (2004: 175–177) and Russell (2004: 242–243) have argued, one's becoming godlike in the *Timaeus* need not consist in one's flight from humanity. Instead, it involves approximating god as a cause of order and giving order to one's mortal nature (including one's passions). Armstrong and Russell also argue that Plato accepts such a "this-worldly" conception of becoming like god in the *Philebus* and *Laws*. In short, Plato's remarks on becoming godlike suggest a model of transcendence that would broadly cohere with, and probably inform, the naturalist reading of EN X.7–8 that I am articulating. But how is a topic for another book.

⁴⁴ One might appeal to Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*, which suggests differing ways by which mortals immortalize themselves (as far as possible): (1) through giving birth to biological children; (2) through creating lasting works of law and poetry; and (3) through contemplation (207a–212a). Perhaps Aristotle identifies related differing ways to attain immortality.

I grant that the *Symposium* influenced Aristotle. But Diotima's account emphasizes the ways in which contemplation and the higher mysteries of *erôs* remain continuous with lower ways of attaining immortality. Through contemplation, Diotima indicates, one immortalizes oneself by *giving birth to true virtue*, which enables one to secure immortal possession of the good (so far as possible for a human being) (212a). Unlike, e.g., Sheffield (2006: 146–150), I take it that such giving birth amounts to more than realizing the intellect's virtue in contemplation. With Hackforth (1950: 44); Price (1989: 48–49); Irwin (1995: 306–311); and Rowe (1998: 200–201), I take Diotima to suggest that contemplators also propagate themselves in the other virtues to which their contemplation gives

discontinuous from what contemplators are doing, and at a fundamental level. So, for Aristotle's account of contemplation's place in the human good to cohere with his more general views about the good for living organisms, Aristotle should show that excellent contemplation *guides* lower functions, and enables human beings to be fully active as human beings. Further, Aristotle should be able to do all of this while still explaining how contemplation remains, in some sense, useless.

Aristotle's remarks on contemplative *nous*' relation to the human body have been, for centuries, among the most disputed in the Aristotelian corpus. The combined textual evidence, I contend, best supports the naturalist approach that I have been defending. Moreover, the view that I attribute to Aristotle – that contemplative *nous*, like the human soul's other life-functions, is integral to the embodied human soul – is philosophically plausible in its own right. Yet these regions of Aristotelian philosophy are rife with scholarly controversies. Interpreters must therefore appreciate their own fallibility.

Suppose, then, that I am wrong and that contemplative *nous* is, in some robust way, detached from the human soul's other life-functions. Suppose that Aristotle need not show that contemplation guides the soul's lower powers. Suppose – contrary to all that I have argued – that contemplative *nous* is existentially separable from the body and outside the bounds of nature. If so, contemplative *nous*' presence in human beings would not seem to violate the “nature does nothing in vain” principle. For in that case, *nous* would not seem to be something with which nature had supplied human beings.

Even then, our grasp of Aristotle would benefit from clarifying what kind of guidance contemplation *could* or *might happen to* provide lower functions when contemplative *nous* (for whatever reason) takes up residence within a perishable human organism. Given that the authoritative functions of plants and animals play some role in maintaining those organisms, then, it would be illuminating to see whether Aristotle could offer a parallel account of human contemplation. Showing how contemplation in fact *does* guide lower functions would reveal new insights into contemplation and its activity. It would show that Aristotle's views on contemplation are – in practice, at least – continuous with some of his views on nutrition's and perception's roles in the lives of plants and animals, respectively.

rise. Through propagating virtue, both in other people and in beautiful deeds, philosophers actualize *and maintain* themselves as happy as far as they can.

5.7 Three Problems to Consider

Here is a quick map of the rest of this book, which responds to the issues just raised, and which proceeds in three waves. In the remainder of [Chapter 5](#), and throughout [Chapter 6](#), I tackle *the first wave*, a fairly coarse-grained question: according to Aristotle, how is reason, as a general power of the human soul, useful within a human life? I examine reason's role in guiding nonrational desire, and explain how reason is thereby (indirectly) useful for guiding threptic activity. In [Chapter 7](#), I address *the second wave*, a finer-grained question: on the basis of Aristotle's answer to the coarse-grained question, what guiding role does contemplative *nous*, both *qua* useless and *qua* part of reason as a general power, play in human lives? Aristotle, I argue, suggests a response to this question. This response, however, runs into certain difficulties. In [Chapter 8](#), then, I respond to *the third wave*, a fairly specific question: given the difficulties that surround Aristotle's answer to the second wave, exactly how can contemplative *nous* provide the right kind of guidance?

Let me say a word about the first wave, the coarse-grained question that I introduce and discuss in the rest of this chapter. To address the utility question, I temporarily bracket *EN* VI.1's distinction between contemplative and practical *nous* and *EN* X.7–8's remarks on *theôria*. Instead, I propose examining the *Nicomachean Ethics*' broader remarks on reason as a *general* power in the human soul – albeit a power that includes contemplative *nous*.

Here, I follow *EN* I.7 and I.13, which make no distinction between contemplative and practical *nous*. As discussed in [Section 2.2](#), these chapters identify the thinking element of the human soul as authoritative over the nonrational desiderative element, which shares in reason by listening to and obeying reason's orders. Indeed, immediately after distinguishing the thinking element from the element that obeys reason (*EN* I.13, 1103a1–3), Aristotle attributes the ethical virtues to the latter element, but both the virtues of *sophia* and *phronêsis* to the former (*EN* I.13, 1103a3–6). Similarly, *EE* II.1 attributes (all) the intellectual virtues to the human soul's authoritatively rational element, which, *qua* rational, governs the nonrational element (1220a5–13). *EN* VI (= *EE* V) later refines Aristotle's picture of the human soul by suggesting that practical *nous* plays some immediate role in ordering nonrational desire. Nevertheless, *EN* I.7 and I.13, like *EE* II.1, leave open the possibility that contemplative *nous* also plays some role in actively guiding nonrational desire – namely, as an aspect of the soul's authoritative thinking element. Further, as noted, *Problems* XXX.5

identifies *nous* in general terms as a useful instrument in the human soul. In doing so, however, *Problems* XXX.5 need not have only practical *nous* in mind. Finally, Aristotle portrays the human soul's rational element as its ruling element in other works as well (*Politics* I.13, 1260a4–9; *Protrepticus* 7, 41.20–22/B60; 41.27–42.1/B61).

Even after having distinguished contemplative from practical *nous* in *EN* VI.1, Aristotle returns to speaking of *nous* as something like a power for reason as such. *EN* IX.8 distinguishes the fine from the base self-lover according to the way in which the former grants proper authority to *nous*:

[A]t all events he assigns to himself the things that are noblest and best, and gratifies the most authoritative element in himself and in all things obeys this (χαρίζεται ἑαυτοῦ τῷ κυριωτάτῳ, καὶ πάντα τοῦτῳ πείθεται); and just as a city or any other systematic whole is most properly identified with the most authoritative element (τὸ κυριώτατον) in it, so is a man; and therefore the man who loves this and gratifies it is most of all a lover of self. Besides, a man is said to have or not to have self-control according as his intellect has or has not the control (καὶ ἐγκρατὴς δὲ καὶ ἀκρατὴς λέγεται τῷ κρατεῖν τὸν νοῦν ἢ μὴ), on the assumption that this is the man himself; and the things men have done from reason are thought most properly their own acts and voluntary acts. That this is the man himself, then, or is so more than anything else, is plain, and also that the good man loves most this part of him (1168b29–1169a3; ROT).

Given its power to guide human action, Aristotle identifies *nous* as a general power for reason as the human soul's most authoritative power. In this way, Aristotle says, the human soul is like a city, which is “most of all” identifiable with its ruling element. When Aristotle speaks about *nous* here, he might seem to refer to practical *nous* alone.⁴⁵ For Aristotle refers to a power by which one makes choices. But Aristotle does not refer in this passage to practical *nous*. Instead, Aristotle refers only, and in an undifferentiating way, to *nous*, or reason, as such. By speaking broadly, Aristotle allows contemplative *nous*, in principle, also to be an aspect of the *nous* that he describes as authoritative and ruling in the human soul. *Nous* as a general power could be authoritative in virtue of its including contemplative *nous*, which *EN* X.7, taking a more rarified perspective, identifies as authoritative without qualification.

If one keeps in mind Aristotle's coarse-grained remarks on reason – the broad power that the *Nicomachean Ethics*' earlier chapters, provisionally, identify as authoritative – one notices that Aristotle's sketch of happiness

⁴⁵ As Cooper ([1975] 1986: 172) argues.

recalls the one developed in Plato's *Republic*.⁴⁶ On both of these accounts, living well consists in the whole soul's harmonious activity under reason's guidance. The resulting coarse-grained sketch of happiness also broadly coheres with Aristotle's general account of the good for living organisms. For reason in the *general* sense proves useful, after all: per *EN* I.7 and I.13, it guides human powers for nonrational desire. But on a view that the *Republic* develops, contemplation – strikingly – guides human action, and it does so as part of the human soul's rational element. Whether the *Republic* consistently develops this view is another matter, and one outside the scope of this book. Yet the *Republic* still promises to offer resources for understanding Aristotle.⁴⁷

A possible strategy for addressing the utility question, then, comes to light. Suppose that reason as a general power guides nonrational desire. Suppose, further, that nonrational desire, as a power of the *aisthêtikon*, not only subserves reason, but guides a human being's threptic activity. Suppose, finally, that contemplative *nous*, as an aspect of reason as a general power, turns out to play an authoritative role in reason's usefully guiding nonrational desire. If so, then contemplative *nous* will play a useful, authoritative, actively guiding role within the economy of human life-functions. If these points obtain, and if we can articulate contemplative *nous*' guiding role, then we can answer the utility question.

To understand how reason as a general power guides threptic activity, one should first consider how nonrational desire guides such functioning. Thus, I turn to *epithumia* and *thumos*, the two forms of nonrational desire that Aristotle attributes to all animals, including

⁴⁶ Cooper ([1975] 1986: 168–169) notes the similarities between Aristotle's views of the intellect in *EN* IX and those of Plato's *Republic*.

⁴⁷ Annas (1981: 260–266), citing Irwin, argues that, in its middle books, the *Republic* slides from a practical conception of the philosopher (according to which the philosopher guides his or her practice by reference to philosophical understanding) to a purely contemplative conception (according to which “what characterizes him or her is the desire to escape entirely from the world of practical affairs” and engage in the maximally superior activity of contemplating forms). (Such a reading might gain some support from passages such as *Republic* VII.517d–518b; 519b–c; 520d–521b).

These issues in the *Republic* parallel some of the issues that I explore in Aristotle, and one can say more about them than I can here. For denials that the *Republic* is, in fact, committed to a purely contemplative conception of the philosopher, see, e.g., E. Brown (2000: 7–8) and Nightingale (2004: 134–137). Both emphasize that the *Republic*'s philosophers show, at most, a certain (reasonable) resistance to *political* activity, not to virtuous *practical* activity. Ultimately, Annas (1981: 263) observes, nothing compels Plato to accept the purely contemplative conception of the philosopher: “Plato could have stressed as much as he liked the value of studying the Forms and the perspective from which all worldly concerns seem infinitely little, and still have held the practical conception.” I thank Eric Brown for asking about these matters.

human beings (*DA* III.9, 432b5; *MA* 6, 700b15–22; 701a36–701b1; *EN* VII.12, 1153a31–33; *EE* II.7, 1223a26–27; II.10, 1225b27–30; *Politics* III.16, 1287a30–32; *Rhetoric* I.10, 1369a1–4).⁴⁸ Once more, and unsurprisingly, Aristotle's moral psychology shows the influence of Plato's *Republic*. To this influence I now turn.

⁴⁸ In addition to these nonrational modes of desire, Aristotle identifies a form of rational desire, βούλησις, or wish (e.g., at *Rhetoric* I.10, 1369a1–4). Hence, as Cooper ([1988] 1999: 241) observes, it is somewhat surprising that Aristotle does not explicitly distinguish the three forms of desire in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, although Aristotle gestures toward the distinction (e.g., at *EN* III.2, 1111b10–12).

The First Wave
Reason, Desire, and Threptic Guidance
in the Harmonized Soul

6.1 *Epithumia*

Aristotle identifies *epithumia* as nonrational desire for the pleasant (*Topics* VI.3, 140b26–30; VI.8, 147a1; *PA* II.17, 661a7–9; *EN* III.1, 1111a32; III.2, 1111b16–17; VII.9, 1151b11–12; *EE* II.7, 1223a34; VII.2, 1235b22; *Rhetoric* I.10, 1369b15–16). Like Plato’s Socrates, Aristotle also identifies *epithumia* as, paradigmatically, desire for the bodily pleasures associated with eating, drinking, and sexual intercourse (cf. *Republic* IV.437e and 439d with *DA* II.3, 414b5–15; *PA* II.17, 661a6–8; *EN* III.10, 1118a31–32; *Rhetoric* I.11, 1370a17–27). Aristotle calls such bodily pleasures “necessary” (*EN* VII.4, 1147b24), for they conduce to our meeting our basic threptic needs.¹

Only mortal, embodied organisms with perceptive powers have such *epithumiai*. On the one hand, plants lack *epithumia* because plants can meet their threptic needs without locomotion. Per *DA* III.12 (discussed in [Chapter 3](#)), *epithumia* arises with perception because animals, unlike plants, typically must *move* to feed and reproduce themselves. When animals perceive potential sources of food, drink, and sex, such items – the first movers of perceptive organisms – *appear as good*. *Epithumia*, in turn, serves as a secondary mover that directs animals toward these apparent goods (*MA* 6, 700b15–25; b35–701a1). Without *epithumia*, animals would fail to meet their threptic needs, and so would ultimately perish. On the other hand, immortal gods lack *epithumia*. As eternally active, invulnerable, and, hence, lacking any threptic needs, gods exist beyond passion.

Aristotle generally concurs with Plato’s Socrates on these points as well. In the *Republic*, Socrates argues that at least some forms of *epithumia* (e.g., *epithumiai* for healthy food) are necessary. Without them, human beings would perish. Such *epithumiai*, then, benefit human beings by

¹ Cf. White (1992: 141); Pearson (2012: 99).

sustaining their health and good condition (*Republic* VIII.558d–559b). Yet Socrates identifies such desires for bodily pleasure as only the “clearest” examples of *epithumia* (*Republic* IV.437d3), not as exhaustive. Human beings have *epithumiai*, after all, for other objects as well, including wealth (*Republic* IX.580e–581a). Similarly, Aristotle observes that human beings have *epithumia* for objects that are unnecessary but choiceworthy in themselves (καθ’ αὐτά: *EN* VII.4, 1147b29). These objects include such “fine and serious things” as honor, gain, wealth, and victory (*EN* VII.4, 1147b30; 1148a23–26; cf. *Rhetoric* I.10, 1369a12–13; I.11, 1370b32–34). Unlike food, drink, and sex, such items are not necessary for self-maintenance in any immediate and unqualified way.

Yet *epithumiai* for these latter items benefit human beings.² According to Aristotle, such external goods establish the conditions for the fullest exercise of the human function in at least two ways. (1) These items (such as wealth) partly constitute certain virtuous actions (such as generous giving) (*EN* I.8, 1099a32–b2). (2) These items establish the optimal background for our actions, a context conducive to our unimpeded agency. Lacking these goods restricts the virtuous person’s agency and precludes his blessedness (*EN* I.8, 1099b2–6; I.10, 1100b22–1101a13).³ For invulnerable, immortal gods, such items are useless (cf. *EN* X.8, 1178b8–18). But for beings like us, I take Aristotle to hold, such items provide security, some assurance that our agency can succeed in the face of unpredictable fortune. They conduce to the successful agency of rational animals who face internal and external *threats* – including death, bodily injury, old age, disease, lack of food, deformity, weakness, and mutilation (*Rhetoric* II.8, 1386a7–16). Given Aristotle’s focus on threats to the body, such goods provide security, I take it, by securing our chances for meeting our threptic needs. External goods do not meet these needs directly. (One cannot digest honor.) Yet such items, all things being equal, enhance our prospects for successful threptic activity (and so, by extension, our prospects for exercising higher functions well).

That external goods secure our meeting our threptic needs explains why these items appear good to human beings, and so show up as *epithumia*’s objects. Consider wealth, whose possession Aristotle identifies as “a tool

² Socrates grants that desires for relish are acceptable (because beneficial and therefore necessary). Accordingly, Socrates describes unnecessary desires as harmful (*Republic* VIII.559b–c). Aristotle, for his part, identifies only excessive unnecessary desires as harmful (*EN* VII.4, 1148a26–28).

³ On external goods as providing a preferred context for the exercise of virtue, see Cooper ([1985] 1999) and Walker (2014: 172–176). Roche (2014) argues that external goods, further, make a constitutive contribution to happiness. E. Brown (2006) argues that they do not.

with respect to life” (ὄργανον πρὸς ζωήν: *Politics* I.4, 1253b31). Money serves “the needs of life” (τὴν χρείαν . . . πρὸς τὸ ζῆν: *Politics* I.9, 1257a36–37), and secures the items one needs for living (*Politics* I.4, 1253b24–25). Indeed, one “lives through these things” (ὥς τοῦ ζῆν διὰ τούτων ὄντος: *EN* IV.1, 1120a3). The origin of the desire to accumulate unlimited money, then, is a desire for “living, but not living well” (περὶ τὸ ζῆν, ἀλλὰ μὴ τὸ εὖ ζῆν). Insofar as our desires for living extend “into infinity” (εἰς ἄπειρον), we similarly desire the things productive of living (τῶν ποιητικῶν: *Politics* I.9, 1257b40–1258b2). Aristotle does not endorse the desire for unlimited accumulation, for reasons I will discuss. Yet Aristotle highlights how money conduces to our meeting our threptic needs.

Aristotle does not explain how wealth becomes an object of *epithumia* proper. His view, however, is probably akin to one reasonably attributable to Plato’s Socrates (*Republic* IX.580e–581a). On this view, we come to have *epithumia* for wealth not because our epithumetic capacities engage in covert instrumental reasoning (of the form “wealth promotes the satisfaction of basic appetites for threptic replenishment; hence desire wealth”). Instead, such *epithumia* arises because we come, through our ethical education, to *associate* our possessing wealth with our meeting our threptic needs.⁴ Aristotle both emphasizes the role of ethical education in guiding our desires and acknowledges Plato for indicating this role (*EN* II.3, 1104b11ff). In spelling out such an account, Aristotle would presumably appeal to the roles of memory and *phantasia* in associating the possession of wealth with pleasures linked to threptic satisfaction (cf. *Physics* VII.3, 247a11–14; *EN* III.10, 1118a10–13).⁵

In identifying honor as an object of *epithumia* (*EN* VII.4, 1148a23–26; cf. 1147b29–30), Aristotle, at first glance, shows a certain contrast with Plato, who suggests that honor is an object of spirited, i.e., thumotic, desire (*Republic* VIII.548c). Aristotle can explain how human beings develop *epithumiai* for honor (and kindred items, such as victory) in the same general way. Aristotle notes that honor is thought to be the greatest of external goods (*EN* IV.3, 1123b20–21). Part of honor’s value for human

⁴ Here, I am indebted to Lorenz’s discussion of the *Republic*’s views on the *epithumêtikon*’s attachment to wealth. On Lorenz’s reading (2006: 47–48), the appetitive part, via “suitable habituation and acculturation in the context of a life lived in human society,” comes to associate the possession of wealth with the fulfillment of its appetites. The appetitive part thereby comes to desire wealth “as a direct source of pleasure.”

⁵ For Aristotle’s views on how we can associate one item with another, see *De Memoria* 2, 451b10–25. On *epithumia* for nonbodily pleasures, see also Pearson (2012: 100–104).

beings is grounded in its external confirmation of our self-worth (cf. *EN* I.5, 1095b27). But Aristotle also suggests ways in which honor and good reputation promote one's security within the *polis*. For while the *polis* exists for the sake of a good life, it *comes to be* at least for the sake of life itself, that is, for meeting basic threptic needs (*Politics* I.2, 1252b29–31; III.9, 1280a31ff; 1280b29–35; cf. *EN* VIII.9, 1160a8–11; Plato, *Republic* II.369b–372a).⁶

People bestow honor on those who benefit the communities in which they live (*EN* VIII.14, 1163b7–8). A good reputation and secure social position, however, conduce to one's securely meeting one's threptic needs. Thus, people delight in honor from the powerful because they hope thereby to obtain what they need (του δέωνται): “therefore, as a sign of comfort they delight in honor” (ὥς δὴ σημείω τῆς εὐπαθείας χαίρουσι τῇ τιμῇ: *EN* VIII.8, 1159a17–24). Human beings associate the possession of honor and victory with the bodily comfort that they obtain in securely fulfilling their threptic needs.⁷ Similar accounts pertain, I suggest, to *epithumia* for other external goods.⁸

6.2 *Thumos*

Thus far, *epithumia*. Various obstacles, however, can hinder an animal's satisfying its *epithumiai*. If the animal cannot eliminate these hindrances, the animal either fails to meet its threptic needs or it meets them less well. What Aristotle calls *thumos*, then, reveals itself as the nonrational desire to overcome and eliminate both direct and indirect potential obstacles to *epithumia*'s satisfaction.⁹

⁶ As Salkever (1990: 84) writes, “Survival or stability and political integration (a minimum of *stasis*, or civil disorder) are only necessary conditions of good politics, but they are very necessary.”

⁷ See, for instance, Aristotle's remarks on the wealthy and the powerful in *Rhetoric* II.16–17. External goods provide such people with security and invincibility, and threaten to generate hubris and arrogance (e.g., 1391a18; 1391a33).

⁸ Aristotle identifies the “apparent good” as the object of desire (e.g., *DA* III.10, 433a27–29; *MA* 6, 700b23–29; *EN* III.4, 1113a23–24; *EE* VII.2, 1235b26–29). There is some debate over whether the “apparent good” in question is best construed extensionally/objectively (as Corcilius [2011] argues) or intensionally/subjectively (as Moss [2012: 6–9]) argues. Both sides to this debate, however, grant that epithumetic capacities alert animals to harms and benefits. See Corcilius (2011) (whose account emphasizes *epithumia*'s self-maintenance value) and Moss (2012: 37–38).

⁹ On *thumos* in Aristotle, see Lord (1982: 159–164); Koziak (2000: ch. 3); Pearson (2012: ch. 5); Leunissen (2012: 524–427). The Greek prefix *epi-*, which can mean upon, towards, near, by, and the like, suggests *epithumia*'s close relation to *thumos*. In Plato, *Cratylus* 419d–e, Socrates suggests that *epithumia* gets its name from opposing *thumos*. While Socrates offers one specific way of linking these two modes of desire, the key etymological point is that *epithumia* and *thumos* are closely linked.

Like Plato's Socrates, Aristotle identifies anger (*ὀργή*) as a paradigmatic case of *thumos*.¹⁰ Aristotle, in fact, often speaks interchangeably of *thumos* and anger (*EE* II.7, 1223b27–28; *Rhetoric* I.10, 1369a1–4; a7; II.2, 1378a30–32). Consider Aristotle's account of how anger comes to flare:

Whether, then, another man opposes him either directly in any way, as by preventing him from drinking when he is thirsty, or indirectly; whether someone works against him, or fails to work with him, or otherwise vexes him while he is in this mood, he is equally angry (*ὀργίζεται*) in all these cases (*Rhetoric* II.2, 1379a12–16; ROT).

On this account, and in its starkest form, *thumos* is a kind of “fighting spirit” that flares when an animal (whether nonrational or rational) is directly or indirectly blocked or opposed in satisfying bodily *epithumiai* (e.g., thirst). Once aroused, *thumos* stirs the animal to overcome or eliminate the opposing force. Thus, anger, for instance, includes a desire for revenge (*Rhetoric* II.2, 1378a31).

Aristotle often speaks of *thumos* and anger interchangeably, for he views anger as a particularly conspicuous, fiery kind of *thumos*. Yet Aristotle does not strictly identify anger and *thumos*. For he holds that fear is also “in the thumotic element” (*ὁ δὲ φόβος ἐν τῷ θυμοειδεῖ*; *Topics* IV.5, 126a8–10). But fear and anger are different passions. True, Aristotle could have a generous notion of what it is for a passion to be “in” the spirited element. According to Giles Pearson, who identifies *thumos* simply as “retaliatory desire,” Aristotle might think that anger can check or regulate fear.¹¹ Thus, perhaps fear is “in” the spirited element in the weak sense that anger regulates fear. But – as Pearson admits – Aristotle also explicitly identifies *thumos* as “the power of the soul by which we feel friendly” (*ἡ τῆς ψυχῆς δύναμις ἣ φιλοῦμεν*; *Politics* VII.7, 1327b40–1328a1). And it is unclear how anger can be the source of friendly feeling. Hence, I contend, *thumos* is not identical to anger, though anger is a kind of *thumos*.¹²

To make sense of Aristotle's puzzling – and sketchy – remarks on *thumos*, one must explain why Aristotle links passions such as anger, fear, and friendly feeling. The rough answer, I take it, is that all of these passions

¹⁰ Cf. *Republic* IV.441b on Odysseus' anger and 439e–440a on Leontius' self-directed anger with *EN* III.8, 1116b23–1117a2. See also *Rhetoric* I.10, 1369b11–15; II.1, 1378a20ff.

¹¹ Pearson (2012: 122).

¹² On this point, see Cooper ([1996] 1999: 262). Against Pearson's account of *thumos*, see Scheiter (2013). While I disagree with Pearson's view that Aristotelian *thumos* is (necessarily) to be identified with retaliatory desire, I concur with Pearson's worries about the view – defended by Cooper ([1996] 1999) and G. Lear (2004: 137–145) – that *thumos* has the *kalon* as its proper object, just as *epithumia* and *boulēsis* have the pleasant and the good as their respective proper objects. See Pearson (2012: 131–138).

manifest rousing concern about “oneself or one’s own” (αὐτὸν ἢ τῶν αὐτοῦ) in the face of potential offenses, obstacles, or difficulties (cf. *Rhetoric* II.2, 1378a32–b2; II.8, 1385b16–18).¹³ All such passions, I propose, are “in” the spirited element because all are distinct modes of rousing concern about one’s own interests. *Anger* is an especially clear kind of response to offense or difficulty: it aims to retaliate against the offending obstacle (*Rhetoric* II.4, 1382a5–15). *Fear* arises when one faces destructive future threats that loom near (*Rhetoric* II.5, 1382a21–22; a27–32): fear rouses one to avoid the threat.¹⁴ As for *friendly feeling*, Aristotle seems to have in mind a sense of friendly or communal solidarity and self-assertion against potential outside obstacles or threats. Thus, when those who count as one’s own – one’s friends and family members – betray that solidarity, Aristotle notes, one is angriest (*Politics* VII.7, 1328a1–5).¹⁵

So understood, our capacity for *thumos* invites a teleological explanation akin to that available for *epithumia*. Unlike plants and gods, rational and nonhuman animals face obstacles in satisfying their *epithumiai* and meeting their threptic needs. Such organisms, then, require some way to defend and assert themselves against such obstacles – if sometimes only by fleeing them. Such is *thumos*’ role. *Thumos*’ fiery impulsiveness benefits such organisms, which must respond spontaneously in threatening situations. *Thumos* impels them to act with requisite immediacy.¹⁶

Epithumia in human beings extends beyond food, drink, and sex to such items as honor, victory, and wealth. Similarly, *thumos* in human beings also

¹³ By defining Aristotelian *thumos* as a mode of “rousing concern,” I avoid the interesting question of whether desires for certain determinate kinds of action are essential to the *pathê* Aristotle examines in *Rhetoric* II. Although *Rhetoric* II.2’s account of anger (ὀργή) indicates that a desire for retaliation is essential to the emotion, it is unclear, however, whether Aristotle thinks desires for determinate actions are essential to other emotions. Cooper ([1996] 1999: 251) suspects they might be; Leighton (1996: 223) and Striker (1996: 293) argue that they are not. “Rousing concern” thus seems like an appropriately flexible notion: such concern may show itself as a desire for a certain kind of action; but it need not always.

¹⁴ In *Rhetoric* II.12, Aristotle suggests that being spirited (θυμώδεις) prevents fear (1389a25–28). Here, I take Aristotle to be using θυμώδεις in a narrower sense (as akin to being angry: 1389a26–27), even though he is ultimately committed to a broader sense of *thumos* that incorporates both anger and fear.

¹⁵ Aristotle’s own remarks on *thumos* are few and sketchy. Hence, although my account of *thumos* – which analyzes it in relation to *epithumia* – seeks to understand Aristotle (and is, I think, supported by the texts), it nevertheless owes some inspiration to Aquinas’ Aristotelian account of “irascible” desire (= *thumos*) and its relation to “concupiscible” desire (= *epithumia*). See, in particular, *Summa Theologica* I.81.2; I–II.23.1. On Aquinas’ account, see Cates (2009: 149–155); Miner (2009: 46–53). On the Platonic origins of the *epithumial thumos* distinction, and Aristotle’s acceptance of it, see Cooper ([1996] 1999: 255–264). On the history of the concupiscible/irascible distinction, see Meyer and Martin (2013: 653–654).

¹⁶ With reference to Plato, cf. Irwin (1995: 213).

fumes when appetites for these derivative forms of *epithumia* are hindered. Thus, when one has *epithumia* for honor as such, conspicuous slights also spark *thumos* (*Rhetoric* II.2, 1379a19–22). It is reasonable to think, however, that *thumos* also manifests itself when the objects that would ordinarily fulfill such desires are especially difficult to attain. For instance, wealth and honor are both ordinarily objects of *epithumia*. Yet *significant* wealth or *great* honor impose special obstacles to their attainment and maintenance. Hence, acquiring and using these latter objects rouses *thumos*. For this reason, I argue, Aristotle distinguishes the virtues concerning wealth and honor (liberality and proper ambition) from those concerning significant wealth and great honor (magnificence and magnanimity).¹⁷

Once more, Aristotle follows Plato's Socrates. Like Socrates, Aristotle compares *thumos* to a watchdog who rears its head when possible signs of danger approach, even if the danger proves illusory (cf. *Republic* IV.440d with *EN* VII.6, 1149a25–32). Like Socrates (*Republic* IV.440a–b), Aristotle suggests that *thumos* – at least in rational animals – has an evaluative aspect and is a kind of auxiliary to reason. When instantiated in human souls, *thumos* is not a pure, objectless psychic inflammation. Instead, *thumos* flares when a rational animal implicitly evaluates something as a potential offense, as an unwarranted interference with one's security or course of action. *Thumos* in human beings, then, is thus open to rational persuasion. Should one revise or reject one's implicit evaluation of an obstacle as an *unwarranted* interference, one's *thumos* calms. As Aristotle explains, *thumos* listens to reason's orders like a hasty servant who springs into action before having heard the complete order (*EN* VII.6, 1149a25–28). *Thumos* moves us to act before we receive a full assessment of the situation. If Aristotle and Socrates disagree, they do so on a point I have already noted: Socrates, in practice at least, identifies honor and victory as the well-defined intentional objects of *thumos* alone. Aristotle, by contrast, allows these particular goods as such also to be *epithumia*'s objects.¹⁸ Yet Aristotle agrees, I contend, that great honor is an object of *thumos*.

Aristotle, then, suggests a functional account of *epithumia* and *thumos* in rational and nonhuman animals. Such forms of nonrational desire enable animals to meet their threptic needs. Nevertheless, nonrational desire in human beings requires reason's input and guidance to function well.

¹⁷ Following Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II.60.5. For further discussion, see [Section 9.4–5](#).

¹⁸ See Cooper ([1996] 1999: 263). On the respective differences between Aristotle and Plato's Socrates on the relative reason-responsiveness of nonrational desire, see Sparshott (1982: 490).

6.3 Reason, Ethical Virtue, and the Regulation of Nonrational Desire

How, then, does reason as a general power guide (though not subserve) nonrational desire? To answer this question, consider *EN* I.13, which appeals to the phenomena of *enkrateia* (self-control) and *akrasia* (incontinence) to infer the existence of a nonrational “part” of the human soul distinct from reason. Both self-controlled and akratic agents seem to possess a reason that “exhorts them rightly and toward the best” (*EN* I.13 1102b15–16). Since their desires conflict with reason’s orders, however, reason differs from such desire. The nonrational desires of both akratic and vicious agents fail to obey reason’s prescriptions. The nonrational desires of self-controlled and virtuous agents, by contrast, listen to reason and follow its advice. Yet whereas the self-controlled agent’s nonrational desire follows reason begrudgingly, resisting its call, the virtuous agent’s nonrational desire follows reason without a struggle.

In appealing to *akrasia* and *enkrateia*, *EN* I.13’s deduction of a nonrational “part” of the human soul follows *Republic* IV’s argument for distinguishing the rational calculating part (λογιστικόν) from both (1) a “nonrational and appetitive” part (ἄλογιστόν τε καὶ ἐπιθυμητικόν: 439d7–8) and (2) a “spirited” part (θυμοειδές: 441a2).¹⁹ Conflicts between reason and nonrational desire reveal, in turn, the role that Aristotle, like Socrates, attributes to reason in a well-functioning soul. According to Socrates, reason forbids an agent from pursuing objects of nonrational desire (439c); reason does so in virtue of “being wise and having foresight over the entire soul” (σοφῶ ὄντι καὶ ἔχοντι τὴν ὑπὲρ ἀπάσης τῆς ψυχῆς προμήθειαν: 441e4–5). Reason possesses knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) of what conduces to the whole soul’s good functioning (442c; 443e).

Aristotle agrees. Nonrational desire demands satisfaction *now*, regardless of whether such fulfillment conduces to one’s meeting one’s long-term needs. Reason, by contrast, is future-oriented, and it considers one’s overall, long-term good (*DA* III.10, 433b7–10). On this basis, reason is a fitting, authoritative ruler (*Politics* I.2, 1252a31–34). (Recall Aristotle’s principle of rulership [see [Section 4.3](#)].) On Aristotle’s (patriarchal) view, a (good) father grasps what conduces to the welfare of the household and its various

¹⁹ Cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 70aff and *Phaedrus* 253cff. In fact, Aristotle notes the commonplace that the tripartite soul is peculiar (ἴδιον) to the human being (*Topics* V.4, 133a30–32). In context, however, it is unclear whether he refers to Platonic tripartition (reason/*thumos*/*epithumia*) or the sort of tripartition that *DA* II.2–3 discusses (reason/perception/nutrition). *Virtues and Vices* – usually thought pseudo-Aristotelian, but defended as authentic by Simpson (2013b) – accepts Platonic tripartition and analyzes virtues accordingly.

members, including the children. Likewise, (well-functioning) reason grasps what conduces to the functioning of the whole human soul, including nonrational desire. Hence, like a father who guides, corrects, and educates his otherwise reckless young, reason guides, exhorts, and reproves for the sake of correcting excessive nonrational desire and rendering such desire moderate and rational (*EN* I.13, 1102b33–1103a1).

In the human soul, then, nonrational desire functions well only when reason exercises authority over it (*EN* III.12, 1119b13–19). *Epithumia* and *thumos* can dominate judgment, and – uncontrolled – induce states akin to madness (*EN* II.9, 1109b7–11; VII.3, 1147a15–17; *Rhetoric* II.1, 1378a19–22; cf. *Politics* VIII.7). Thus, reason prevents nonrational desire from running rampant and seeking unmeasured satisfaction at the cost of the human being's overall good, i.e., the human being's persistence and active functioning as a rational animal. At the same time, reason must permit nonrational desire (1) to move human beings toward pleasant objects that fulfill a human being's various needs and (2) to rise up against obstacles to such fulfillment. Hence, reason does not simply *repress* nonrational desires. Instead, when perfected, it allows their fulfillment within a measured limit.²⁰ What conduces to, and is consistent with, a human being's persistence and full activity as a human being, I take it, constitutes these limits. Human beings, then, require reason to regulate nonrational desire within proper – i.e., ethically virtuous – bounds.

Qua ethically virtuous, an agent will be intermediately disposed to the pleasures and pains nonrational desires seek to enjoy and to avoid (*EN* II.3, 1104b8–9; 1105a13–14; II.6, 1106b27–28; 1106b15–16). The virtuous person will lack dispositions to feel some unvarying moderate degree of pain or pleasure, regardless of the trigger. Instead, he will possess balanced dispositions to feel varying degrees of pain or pleasure, according to the circumstances.²¹ The virtuous person will respond well, in particular, to pleasures and pains attendant to *epithumia* and *thumos*. For we experience *epithumia* as a pain at the lack of some object whose possession and consumption brings pleasure (*EN* III.11, 1119a4–5). We experience *thumos* as a pain at some offensive obstacle to the fulfillment of *epithumia*, the thought of whose retaliatory overcoming or elimination also brings pleasure (*Rhetoric* II.2, 1378b1–2). Aristotle identifies these pleasures and pains

²⁰ Cf. Halper (1993: 63); Irwin (2007: section 113, esp. 201). Cf. Gentzler (2004: 364) on *Republic* VIII, 554d–e and 558d–e.

²¹ See Urmson ([1973] 1980) on intermediacy. Gottlieb (2009: 19–25), using a metaphor that she attributes to Norman Kretzmann, compares the virtuous agent to a well-calibrated scale, capable of responding appropriately.

as somehow bodily. *Physics* VII.3 claims that “every ethical virtue [is] about bodily pleasures and pains” (ἅπαντα γὰρ ἡ ἠθικὴ ἀρετὴ περὶ ἡδονᾶς καὶ λύπας τὰς σωματικάς: 247a7–8). This point is plausible enough when *epithumiai* for food, drink, and sex are at issue, and when *thumos* flares in response to impediments. Ethical virtues that address *thumos* and *epithumia* concerning external goods, however, are “about” bodily pleasures and pains in the weaker sense that a full analysis of an ethical virtue would refer at some point to bodily pleasures and pains.

Ethical virtue is concerned with what is intermediate – “the mean not of the thing, but the [mean] relative to us” (*EN* II.6, 1106b7). From the widest perspective, the virtuous mean is “relative to us” in the sense that it *relates to us as organisms of such-and-such a type*.²² Consider Aristotle’s remarks on bodily health. The internal symmetry that constitutes and preserves a given organism’s healthy body determines what counts as too much and too little water for its nourishment (cf. *EN* II.2, 1104a16–18; *Physics* VII.3, 246b3–10). The mean with respect to water, then, will differ according to the respective needs of plants and human beings. The general kind-relative mean, however, admits of more exact specification according to the specific needs and circumstances of individual members of that kind. Generic human needs determine, in part, what counts as a healthy regimen of diet and exercise. The specifics of this outlined regimen, however, will vary for the scrawny novice wrestler and for beefy Milo (*EN* II.6, 1106a27–b7). Analogously, what preserves the whole human soul’s harmonious internal order (including the soul’s threptic aspects) will generically determine the fitting amount of nonrational desire to feel in a situation. Yet this general, kind-relative mean in respect to nonrational desire is differently specifiable according to the varying circumstances of particular individuals, some of which may include differences in those individuals themselves.

The mean relative to us, then, is rooted in our needs as human beings – including our threptic needs. Excessive and deficient *epithumia* and *thumos* impair one’s threptic activity, or put it at risk. By contrast, well-calibrated *epithumia* and *thumos* satisfy, or secure one’s satisfying, one’s threptic needs:

(1) ***Epithumia***. Excessive *epithumia* moves one to pursue one item that would fulfill threptic needs (e.g., drink), though at the cost of attaining other items that would fulfill other threptic needs (e.g., food and sex).

²² See L. Brown (1997).

Similarly, excessive *epithumia* for one item (e.g., sex) moves one to pursue that item, but at the neglect of other items (e.g., money and honor) that would help secure one's prospects for meeting one's threptic needs. Deficient *epithumia* fails to move one to obtain satisfactory amounts of food, drink, and sex. It also fails to move one to obtain items – including wealth and honor – that otherwise fulfill one's threptic needs, or secure one's threptic prospects.

(2) *Thumos*. Excessive *thumos* leads one into needless danger, undermines one's social relations, and diverts one's energies into pursuing objects beyond one's attainment. Such outcomes threaten either one's threptic activity (directly) or impair one's threptic prospects (e.g., by needlessly wasting one's resources). Deficient *thumos* for an item, by contrast, is a degree insufficient to move one to assert oneself and to protect oneself and one's interests from threats and obstacles.

For Aristotle, then, being ethically virtuous is a necessary condition for benefiting without qualification from external goods. According to *EE* VIII.3, “the things about which people compete and seeming to be the greatest goods – honor and wealth and bodily virtues and good fortune and powers – are good by nature, but they can be harmful to some people on account of [character] states” (1248b27–30; cf. *Politics* VII.13, 1332a23–25). The vicious person, *qua* deficient, responds insufficiently to certain goods. Such deficient response precludes him from enjoying, and benefiting from, these goods. The vicious person, *qua* excessive, overresponds to certain goods, or to certain aspects of such goods. Such excessive response leads him to pursue such items at the expense of responding to, and enjoying, other needed goods. His gains, then, are also losses. In this sense, virtue is a “power, as it seems, providing and securing good things” (δύναμις ὡς δοκεῖ ποριστική ἀγαθῶν καὶ φυλακτική: *Rhetoric* I.9, 1366a36–37; cf. *Politics* VII.1, 1323a37–41). Virtue, I suggest, allows one to pursue and enjoy, compatibly and compossibly, external goods that fulfill human needs. Virtue enables an agent to harmonize his desires, and thus to harmonize his enjoying certain goods with his enjoying other goods, including the common good of his city, the context in which he, as a political animal, attains any happiness that he can. Thus, virtue and virtuous action manifest proper order, symmetry, and boundedness – what Aristotle calls the *kalon*, i.e., the fine, the noble, or the beautiful.²³ Virtue

²³ On ethical virtue as a condition for benefit from external goods, see Broadie (1999: 244–247).
On virtue and the order that it establishes within a life, see Cooper ([1996] 1999: 274–276).
On ethical virtue's allowing for the compossible enjoyment of different goods, see Den Uyl (1991:

and virtuous action are for the sake of the *kalon*, I suggest, by displaying, and conducing to, the virtuous agent's harmonized soul, possession of external goods, and way of life.

6.4 Psychic Harmony, the Human Good, and Self-Maintenance

According to Aristotle, then, reason as a general power regulates *epithumia* and *thumos* by guiding them and exhorting them aright. In maintaining nonrational desires within virtuous bounds, reason guides nonrational desire. Such desire, in turn, guides the *threptikon* in nourishing and reproducing a body capable of both lower and higher life-functions. Reason's authority establishes a harmonized, synergistic soul whose various powers are well-ordered for the good of the whole – i.e., for the persistence and exercise of a rational (ultimately contemplative) way of life.

In the *Republic*, Socrates holds that the just person, whose soul is governed by reason, acts well toward himself. When reason governs the just person's soul with a view to all the soul's parts, the just person's soul avoids internal strife and breakdown. The just person's soul, Socrates says, functions optimally and integrally:

He regulates well what is really his own and rules himself. He puts himself in order, is his own friend, and harmonizes (συναρμόσαντα) the three parts of himself like three limiting notes in a musical scale – high, low, and middle. He binds together those parts and any others in between, and from having been many things he becomes entirely one, moderate and harmonious (ἡρμουςμένον; *Republic* IV.443d3–e2).²⁴

For his part, Aristotle also holds that the good man is related to his friend as he is related toward himself (*EN* IX.4, 1166a29–31). The good man, on Aristotle's view, wishes and does what is good for himself (1166a3–4). He wishes himself to exist and live, for his own sake (1166a4–5). For his soul is free of internal faction:

For this person is of the same mind with himself (ὁμογνωμονεῖ ἑαυτῷ), and he is desirous of the same things with his whole soul (κατὰ πᾶσαν τὴν ψυχὴν); and indeed he wishes for himself good things and apparent [good things] and he acts (for it is typical for the good person to labor for the good) and he acts for the sake of himself (for he acts for the sake of the thinking

203–206). On the *kalon*'s features, see *Metaphysics* M.3, 1078a36–b1 and *Topics* V.5, 135a13, discussed by Rogers (1993: 355–357). Irwin (2011) argues that the *kalon* signifies moral rightness in ethical contexts. Kraut (2013), by contrast, highlights the *kalon*'s aesthetic dimensions.

²⁴ Translation by Grube, revised by Reeve, from Cooper (1997).

aspect (διανοητικοῦ), the very thing each person seems to be); and he wishes himself also to live and to be preserved (καὶ ζῆν δὲ βούλεται ἑαυτὸν καὶ σῶζεσθαι), and most of all that by which he thinks (μάλιστα τοῦτο ὃ φρονεῖ; 1166a13–19).

Aristotle initially appears to identify the virtuous human being exclusively with his thinking element. Aristotle's assertion that the virtuous man wishes for the same things with his *whole soul*, however, prevents any such easy identification. Aristotle describes the thinking element, or that “by which” a human being thinks, as only “most of all” or primarily what the good person wishes to preserve and to exercise. “Most of all” or primarily, however, does not mean “exclusively.”²⁵ Hence, Aristotle implicitly allows the virtuous person to identify himself with his other capacities as well, insofar as they also form parts of a system in which the thinking element has special authority. The good person, who cares especially for this thinking aspect, is nevertheless the exemplary self-lover (φιλαυτός: IX.8, 1168b29–34). In gratifying the rational element, he benefits himself as a whole human being.

For the virtuous person whose life-activity harmonizes with this element, “living in itself is good and sweet” (αὐτὸ τὸ ζῆν ἀγαθὸν καὶ ἡδύ: *EN* IX.9, 1170a26). Like Socrates, then, Aristotle thinks it necessary for non-rational desire “to harmonize with reason” (συμφωνεῖν τῷ λόγῳ) in the virtuous agent (*EN* III.12, 1119b15–16). (“For reason and desire do not always harmonize” [συμφωνεῖ: *EE* II.8, 1224a24–25].) Aristotle echoes Socrates' denial that the soul is literally a harmony (cf. *Phaedo* 91ff with *DA* I.4 and *Eudemus*, fr. 45 [Rose, 3rd edn.]). Yet Aristotle grants that we can make good metaphorical sense of harmony talk, including talk of virtue as a kind of harmony (συμφωνία: *Topics* IV.3, 123a33–37; VI.2, 139b32–140a2; cf. *Phaedo* 93cff). Thus, while Aristotle rejects the harmony theory of the soul, he accepts that the soul functions harmoniously under reason's guidance.²⁶

When reason fails to guide nonrational desire, however, the soul becomes conflicted and kakodaimonic. The result, says Plato's Socrates, is “a certain civil war (στράσιν τινά) between the three parts,” a “rebellion”

²⁵ See *Metaphysics* Z.13, 1039a19–20 and *Protrepticus* 7, 42.1–4/B62, discussed by Whiting (1986: 86–87n36) as distinguishing between being μάλιστα *X* and being μόνον *X*. Cf. Charles (1999: 220).

²⁶ See Halper (1995: 8), from whose discussion I have benefited generally. Sparshott (1982); Yu (2001: 116–119); Kraut (2016: section 3.2); and Scott (2015) offer detailed comparisons of the *Republic* and the *EN*. Irwin (1988: 609–610n5); Weiner (1993); and Linck (2006) all note similarities between Aristotle and Plato on psychic harmony and the human good. I have also benefited from Gentzler's (2004) Platonic account of wellbeing.

(ἐπανάστασιν) by *epithumia* and *thumos* against reason's authority that results in the soul's "turmoil" (ταραχήν) (*Republic* IV.444b). Aristotle picks up on this suggestion in his account of psychic conflict in akratic and vicious agents. Unlike the virtuous, who are truly "self-lovers," the vicious prove to be their own worst enemies:

[H]aving nothing in them lovable, they feel no love toward themselves. Thus, neither do they rejoice nor do they grieve for themselves, those of this sort. For their soul is rent by civil war (στασιάζει), and the element abstaining on account of wickedness grieves, but the other element is pleased, and the one drags him here and the other there, as if tearing him apart (*EN* IX.4, 1166b17–22).

By "following bad passions" (φάυλοις πάθεσιν ἐπόμενος: *EN* IX.8, 1169a14–15), the vicious fail to live according to reason as an authoritative power in the soul. The vicious subordinate reason to nonrational desire, calculating the means necessary to attain the objects of pre-given nonrational desires.²⁷ Vicious agents thereby harm themselves, leading a "wicked and corrupt life" (μοχθηράν ζωὴν καὶ διεφθαρμένην: *EN* IX.9, 1170a23). This life proves to be intrinsically unpleasant, unsatisfying, and *unstable* for a perishable rational animal.

6.5 Ethical Vice and Impaired Threptic Prospects

Why is the vicious person's life so painful? The *threptikon*, I have argued, functions best only under the guidance of well-regulated nonrational desire, and, by extension, of reason as a general power. Hence, Aristotle should accept that a correspondingly close relationship holds between an agent's degree of psychic harmony and that agent's overall stability as a living organism. Aristotle denies that anyone could be completely bad, because anyone completely bad would perish: "Not every [ethical excess] pertains to the same person, at any rate. For this could not be. For the bad destroys even itself (τὸ γὰρ κακὸν καὶ ἑαυτὸ ἀπόλλυσι), and if it is entire, it becomes such-as-not-to-be-suffered (ἀφόρητον)" (*EN* IV.5, 1126a11–13).²⁸ One's soul, however, can suffer less catastrophic disruptions of psychic harmony than complete breakdown. A vicious human being may still *persist* if his nutritive, perceptive, and rational powers stay basically

²⁷ On the vicious person's domination by nonrational desire, see, e.g., Irwin (2007: section III, esp. 196).

²⁸ Following Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, 257–258. Citing *Republic* I. 351d–352a, E. Brown (2012: 68–70) attributes a similar view to Plato: all souls require at least some minimal justice, lest these souls break down.

integrated. Yet the vicious person will not exercise his function as *well* (or as fully, or unimpededly, or securely) as he would *qua* virtuous. The component life-functions of the vicious person's soul conflict, and that conflict prevents the vicious person from exercising the human function as completely (or as actively) as he or she could.

That ethical vice impedes and impairs one's self-maintenance is perhaps counterintuitive. Consider, however, natural defects. Although, say, blindness can be fatal to, say, a zebra, it need not be. A zebra can still get by, as a zebra, through relying on touch alone. Yet blind zebras do not do so nearly as well, or as completely, as zebras with the full advantages of well-functioning eyes. The perceptive life, and self-maintaining activity, of blind zebras is correspondingly precarious and insecure, open to dangers and obstacles that sighted zebras can avoid.²⁹ Hence, nature works *for the best* by providing these organisms with sight as well.

For Aristotle, ethical vices in human beings are akin to such natural defects in plants and nonhuman animals.³⁰ Such vices are not innate: one develops virtue and vice through practice (*EN* II.1). Yet like natural defects, ethical vices prevent rational animals from functioning optimally. For such vices prevent nonrational desire's functioning well. Just as natural defects need not be fatal, the same holds for ethical vices, which nevertheless impede and frustrate those agents in stably maintaining themselves. Again, deficient and excessive dispositions lead human beings to satisfy certain vital needs, and to pursue certain kinds of vital security, either insufficiently or at the expense of other equally, or more, important needs and modes of vital security.

Aristotle does not claim that any degree of ethical vice suffices to destroy a human being's enmattered form. A sufficiently *bad* failure of reason to regulate nonrational desire, however, will have repercussions beyond the vicious agent's suffering. Some illnesses, for instance, strike out of the blue. Yet vice itself generates illnesses. In extreme cases, one may "be sick voluntarily, living akratically and disobeying doctors. *Then* it was possible for him not to be sick, but for one given up, [it is] no longer [possible], just as one can no longer retrieve a stone let loose" (*EN* III.5, 1114a15–18). Hence, one's bad bodily state is blameworthy when caused by one's vicious character:

While no one blames those who are ugly by nature, we blame those who are so owing to want of exercise and care. So it is, too, with respect to weakness

²⁹ On the impaired eyesight of moles, as discussed in *HA* I.9 and IV.8, see [Section 5.2](#).

³⁰ Cf. Foot (2003: ch. 3). Cf. also Socrates' comparison between (1) vice and disease and (2) virtue and health in *Republic* IV.444d–445b.

and infirmity; no one would reproach a man blind from birth or by disease or from a blow, but rather pity him, while everyone would blame a man who was blind from alcoholism or some other form of intemperance (ἀκολασίας). Of vices of the body, then, those in our own power are blamed, those not in our power are not (*EN* III.5, 1114a23–29; ROT).³¹

Ethical vice, then, is continuous with bodily vice. Dysfunctional patterns of nonrational desire cause threptic dysfunction. Aristotle mentions particularly bad agents, whose injuries are self-inflicted. Yet Aristotle presumably also has in mind more modest cases, where milder ethical vice (e.g., milder intemperance) brings about milder threptic impairment (e.g., occasional hangovers).³²

I examine the whole range of ethical virtues in [Chapter 9](#). For now, notice how various ethically vicious dispositions impair one's threptic prospects. Excessive *epithumia* for food, drink, and sex will require one to waste one's wealth (*EN* IV.1, 1121b7–10), thereby wasting material resources conducive to satisfying one's threptic needs over time. Stinginess – excessive *epithumia* for accumulating wealth – entails deficient *epithumia* for other necessary external goods, such as honor, which secure one's threptic prospects in other ways. Excessive *epithumia* for honor, likewise, encourages a deficient *epithumia* for wealth. Excessive *thumos*, in turn, leads one into heedlessly confronting dangers and wasting one's resources in other ways. Deficient *thumos*, for its part, fails to spur one to assert one's interests, including for objects of *epithumia* that either satisfy one's threptic needs or that secure one's threptic prospects. The vicious person's frustration and pain, as discussed in *EN* IX.4, indirectly signals the harm that the vicious person incurs by failing to meet his threptic needs appropriately.

6.6 Reason – Or Practical Reason?

Nutrition and reproduction not only characterize plant life, but they constitute the authoritative means by which plant life maintains itself. The same follows for perception and locomotion in nonrational animal life. Similarly, human beings “live by” reason as a general power, and in just this twofold way. (1) “The rest of the animals, then, most of all live by nature (τῇ φύσει ζῆν), but some [in] small [measure] also by habits (τοῖς

³¹ I substitute “intemperance” for “self-indulgence.”

³² If Charmides' hangover (*Plato*, *Charmides* 155b) results from his intemperate carousing, then Socrates should agree that ethical vice is continuous with bodily vice. Consider Socrates' remarks on the ethical treatment of bodily illness (*Charmides* 156d–157c).

ἔθεσιν), but the human being [lives] also by reason (ἄνθρωπος δὲ καὶ λόγῳ), for he alone has reason” (*Politics* VII.13, 1332b3–5). (2) “While the other [animals] live by images and memories” (μὲν οὖν ἄλλα ταῖς φαντασίαις ζῆ καὶ ταῖς μνήμαϊς) – sharing little of experience – human beings live also “by art and reasonings” (τέχνη καὶ λογισμοῖς: *Metaphysics* A.1, 980b27–28). (3) The Aristotelian author of *Problems* XXX.12 observes that while nonhuman animals live by *orexis*, *thumos*, and *epithumia*, “human being usually lives by *nous*” (τῷ νῷ: 956b35–36). As already noted, *Problems* XXX.5, in turn, explicitly emphasizes the way in which *nous* is, like our other natural endowments, an instrument (ὄργανον: 955b26).

When (1) reason guides nonrational desire within virtuous boundaries and when (2) nonrational desire, so regulated, guides threptic activity, reason indirectly guides threptic activity. So, Aristotle sketches a picture of reason’s role in the human soul that seems capable of addressing the utility question. Indeed, Aristotle appeals to the “nature does nothing in vain” principle to explain, teleologically, why human beings possess reason. As he writes in *Politics* I.2, “For nature, as we say, does nothing in vain; but only the human being among animals has reasoned speech” (1253a9–10). The “voice” (φωνή) of other animals conveys mere pleasure and pain. By contrast, “reasoned speech is for making clear the beneficial and the harmful, and so the just and the unjust” (ὁ δὲ λόγος ἐπὶ τῷ δηλοῦν ἐστὶ τὸ συμφέρον καὶ τὸ βλαβερόν, ὥστε καὶ τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὸ ἄδίκον: 1253a14–15). True, Aristotle here addresses the differing communicative powers of rational and nonhuman animals. Yet Aristotle explicitly highlights the power of *logos*, or reason. And human beings possess this power, Aristotle maintains, because it is *useful*. It clarifies what is beneficial and harmful. It grasps not just what provides immediate pleasure and pain, but what is good and bad.

Yet Aristotle does not yet answer the utility question. For when Aristotle elsewhere specifies what sort of reason proximately regulates nonrational desire, he apparently refers to practical *nous*, not to contemplative *nous*. Consider Aristotle on the reciprocity between *phronêsis* and ethical virtue. In *EN* VI.13, Aristotle distinguishes natural virtue (ἄρετὴ φυσικὴ) from authoritative virtue (κυρία: 1144b15–17). While the latter constitutes virtue in the strict sense, the former constitutes the kind of virtue with which we are born. The natural virtues of character, then, are temperamental character traits – proto-forms of courage, temperance, and good temper – that we share with nonhuman animals (1144b8–9). As for nonhuman animals, so too for human beings, such natural virtues are useful in, and for

maintaining, the lives of those animals.³³ Aristotle holds, however, that our natural ethical virtues develop into *authoritative* ethical virtues only through *phronêsis*' guidance. Naturally virtuous people, for instance, tend to eat and drink moderate amounts, and to show confidence under fire. When lacking *phronêsis*, however, their natural virtues remain underdeveloped. For undiscerning children and nonhuman animals also show the proto-temperance and courage that constitute natural virtue (*EN* VI.13, 1144b8–9; cf. *HA* I.1, 488b13ff). And without direction by practical *nous* in accord with *phronêsis*, such tendencies will prove harmful (1144b9). Temperamental courage, for instance, will tend either toward overkill or toward insufficiency. Therefore, Aristotle compares those who possess the natural virtues unperfected by virtuous practical *nous* to sightless giants: such people fall mightily, since they cannot discern the way (1144b10–12). Something of such impairment appears in the young, who “live more by character than by reasoning” (τῷ γὰρ ἡθεὶ ζῶσι μᾶλλον ἢ τῷ λογισμῷ: *Rhetoric* II.12, 1389a33–34; cf. *EN* I.3, 1095a6–8).

The *phronimos*, by contrast, will grasp the truth about what really is good for him, for *phronêsis* is “a practical, truth-revealing state with reason about things good and bad for a human being” (ἐξιν ἀληθῆ μετὰ λόγου πρακτικὴν περὶ τὰ ἀνθρώπων ἀγαθὰ καὶ κακά: *EN* VI.5, 1140b4–6; cf. 1140b20–21). *Qua phronimos*, one discerns the good and has an accordingly clear view of what one's situations call for. Unlike the sightless giant, the *phronimos* excels in action and has ethical virtue in the full sense (*EN* VI.13, 1144b13–14). Hence, Aristotle concludes, “authoritative [virtue] does not come to be without *phronêsis*” (1144b16–17; cf. 1145a1–2).³⁴

On this basis, interpreters sometimes describe practical *nous* as the power that Aristotle does, or should, identify as authoritative in the human soul. According to Martha C. Nussbaum, for instance, Aristotle holds that “a life for us must be a life organized, in some fashion, by practical reason, in which all functions are informed and infused by reason's organizing activity.”³⁵ Similarly, Terence Irwin maintains that, in *EN* I.7's function argument, “we should take Aristotle to mean that happiness consists in a life guided by practical reason.”³⁶ Likewise,

³³ On natural virtue generally, see Lennox ([1999] 2015); Gottlieb (2009: 107–110); Leunissen (2012). On the ways natural virtues aid animal survival and reproduction, see *HA* VIII.1, as well as Lennox ([1999] 2015: 213) and Leunissen (2012: 513).

³⁴ Aristotle describes certain animals (e.g., bees) as manifesting a certain *phronêsis*. Such intelligence, however, differs from human practical *nous* insofar as the animal version is largely perceptive. See Leunissen (2012: 514).

³⁵ Nussbaum (1995: 116). Cf. Nussbaum (1986: 376). ³⁶ Irwin (1991: 391). Cf. Irwin (1980: 49).

according to John M. Cooper, practical reason “controls and guides” human affairs.³⁷

For her part, Kathleen V. Wilkes argues that if Aristotle *had* identified practical reason as authoritative, then he would have ended up with a correspondingly plausible account of the human good. For then, the human soul’s authoritative function would guide all lower functions as part of a self-maintaining system of activity:

With practical reasoning as the supreme activity, then certainly there will be feedback onto all the other capacities . . . The exercise of practical reason is rendered possible by his lower-order capacities and by the social circumstances in which he lives; his lower-order capacities function well partly because of practical reason’s guidance and partly because of the social and economic conditions of the state.³⁸

That Aristotle might, or should, have identified practical reason as authoritative in the human soul makes a certain sense. After all, excellent practical reasoning *proximately* guides our actions. As matters stand, however, Aristotle does not identify practical reason as the most authoritative human function. Instead, in *EN* X.7, he ultimately assigns this role to contemplative *nous* (or at least *nous qua* contemplative). Thus emerges the utility question. Still, even if Aristotle does not make things easy for himself, we can see how Aristotle *could* respond to the utility question. If contemplative *nous* authoritatively guided practical *nous*, then contemplative *nous* could (1) guide nonrational desire and so could (2) guide both the *aisthêtikon* and the *threptikon*. Contemplative *nous* could guide indirectly, *via* practical *nous*’ mediation.

As just stated, this possibility is highly abstract. Yet Aristotle’s account of the human good follows in key respects Socrates’ account in the *Republic*. Unlike Aristotle, Plato’s Socrates does not distinguish between contemplative and practical *nous*. Nevertheless, the *Nicomachean Ethics*’ distinction between contemplative and practical *nous* finds its roots in the *Republic*. For Aristotle, the distinction between the *epistêmonikon* and the *logistikôn* is the same as that between the *epistêmonikon* and the *doxastikon* (*EN* VI.5, 1140b26; VI.13, 1144b15). But Plato’s Socrates, like Aristotle, distinguishes a doxastic part of the soul from an epistemic part on the basis of their differing respective objects (*Republic* V.478aff). Moreover, Plato’s Socrates suggests that *something like* the exercise of what Aristotle calls contemplative *nous* authoritatively guides practical action.

³⁷ Cooper ([1975] 1986: 172). Everson (1998: 94–95) argues that the human function *is* practical reason.

³⁸ Wilkes ([1978] 1980: 346–347). See also Wilkes (1988: 212–213); (1992: 111).

Philosophers, Socrates suggests, are in the best position to rule the city (*Republic* VI.484c–d). For they concern themselves with that which always is (485a–b) and they contemplate what is orderly and divine (500c–d). They understand the *kalon*, the just, and the good itself, and thereby bring sharper discernment and fuller awareness than non-philosophers do to the task of ruling (VII. 520c–d). Through such insight, they order both their souls and the city by reference to the highest Idea – the Idea of the Good (VII.540a–b).³⁹

Again, Socrates does not distinguish between contemplative and practical *nous*. Yet such passages from the *Republic*, which point to contemplation's action-guiding powers, are pertinent to Aristotle, who does. Aristotle has his disagreements with Plato's Socrates: consider – to name just two examples – Aristotle's criticisms of Kallipolis in *Politics* II.1–5, as well as his rejection of an Idea of the Good in *EN* I.6 and *EE* I.8. Still, the similarities between the moral psychology of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Republic* are real enough. Therefore, we should examine more carefully whether, for Aristotle, contemplative *nous* provides contemplators with cognitive access to objects by reference to which they are (or can make themselves) excellent practical reasoners. If contemplative *nous* could offer such authoritative guidance, how might it do so?

³⁹ Contrary to Yu (2001: 118–119), who denies that, in the *Republic*, contemplation regulates the other parts of the philosopher's soul. At *Republic* VII.527d, Socrates chides Glaucon for identifying theoretical reasoning as instrumental to such practical arts as farming and navigation. But Socrates does not deny that theoretical reasoning informs action: indeed, the other passages I cite suggest how he does so. Cf. Nightingale (2004: 128–129).

E. Brown argues (2004: 286–287) that the insight that the philosophers attain enables them to know what is good, which bolsters their initial motivations, developed through early education, to do what is good. These refined motivations, in turn, divert energy from *epithumia* and *thumos*. Contemplation thus qualifies philosophers to rule by moderating their souls and freeing them from the desire to rule, which Socrates thinks the best rulers will lack (520e–521b; see E. Brown [2004: 281]). As E. Brown notes (2004: 286), this account of Plato's views invites comparison with Aristotle's views on ethical education as consisting of both a grasp of “the that” and “the why” (which I discuss in Section 7.2).

I accept Brown's claims about the ways contemplation can moderate passions. But I suggest, on the basis of 520c–d, that contemplation qualifies philosophers to rule principally in virtue of its epistemic aspects. Contemplation need not magically instill good motivations where they were absent; instead, it enables philosophers fully to recognize what is, after all, good. As Plato's visual metaphors emphasize, theoretical understanding provides philosophers with sharper discernment than others, who are still lost in the shadows. Cf. Bobonich (2007: 154–157).

The Second Wave

Complete Virtue and the Utility of Contemplation

7.1 Does *Sophia* Possess More than Formal Utility?

To see how contemplation could be useful as authoritatively guiding the soul's lower functions, I begin by considering *EN* VI.12, which addresses worries about contemplation's apparent uselessness. Facing a potential objector, whose voice recalls Isocrates', Aristotle considers "what use" (τί χρήσιμοι) both *phronêsis* and *sophia* might possess (1143b18). *Sophia*, after all, is concerned only with unchanging objects, and with none of the contingent sources of benefit from which we might profit (1143b19–20). Aristotle admits that *sophia* does not contemplate those goods about which we deliberate. Nevertheless, he thinks that *sophia* must benefit human life somehow. *Sophia*'s apparent uselessness raises a real question, and one with which he must deal – especially if he is ultimately to identify contemplation as complete happiness, and if he is to respond to familiar Isocratean worries in a *Nicomachean* context.

In response, Aristotle points out that even if *sophia* does not generate other goods, *sophia* nevertheless remains an intellectual virtue. *Sophia*, then, is choiceworthy in two ways. (1) Even if *sophia* were not productive, *sophia* would be choiceworthy for its own sake as the proper virtue of contemplative *nous* (1144a1–2). (2) *Sophia*, however, is productive in at least one sense. Virtues like *sophia*, *qua* "part of the whole of virtue," produce (ποιοῦσι) happiness when exercised (1144a3–6; cf. *MM* I.34, 1197b28–36). *Sophia* is useful in that its exercise is beneficial.¹

Aristotle's response – that *sophia* is choiceworthy for its own sake in these two ways – is reasonable as far as it goes. It offers a preliminary reply, in its immediate dialectical context, to a worry about *sophia*. Here, Aristotle attributes a limited, or *formal*, utility to *sophia*. Contemplative

¹ In this passage, Aristotle assumes for argument's sake that *phronêsis* is as useless as *sophia*. The context makes clear, however, that he does so only for argument's sake.

nous is a constitutive part of the human form (see [Sections 5.4–6](#)), one that distinguishes human life-activity from the life-activity of plants and animals. Just as animals have the power of touch, human beings have contemplative *nous*. Thus, the perfection of this formal component of human nature intrinsically benefits human beings.

As a complete reply to the utility question, however, *EN* VI.12's response is wanting. True, Aristotle thinks that the power of touch is a formal component of animal souls. Yet as discussed in [Section 4.2](#), *DA* III.12 also offers a teleological account of why animals possess touch, one that appeals to perception's useful authoritative guidance for animal threptic needs. Further, Aristotle accepts the "nature does nothing in vain" principle's strong commitments. *EN* VI.12, however, does not identify any guidance that contemplative *nous* offers (*qua* virtuous). And if contemplative *nous* is useless *qua* unguiding – a point which *EN* VI.7 does not initially dispute – it remains unclear why human souls should possess it.

Sarah Broadie puts some of these points well:

If *theôria* really is the fine thing that its devotees affirm, then of course it is not useless in the sense of being a waste of time . . . The problem is to see how, if the summit of human excellence is located in such qualities, any privileged position can be justified for an activity essentially impractical. That is why we cannot take it for granted that theoretical activity is "noble," once it is freed from its historical association with practical virtue.²

Aristotle, however, can respond more decisively to worries about *sophia*'s uselessness. For contemplative *nous* and its virtuous activity, Aristotle suggests, possess more than formal utility. Instead, in other passages, Aristotle portrays contemplation as *substantively useful* in human life. In such passages, contemplation shows authority in the human soul by authoritatively guiding the human soul's lower functions. Individually, perhaps, none of these passages establishes the reading I propose. Taken together, however, they provide a strong cumulative case.

(1) *EN* X.7 describes contemplative *nous* as "the authoritative and better" part of us (τὸ κύριον καὶ ἀμεινον: 1178a3). For such *nous* "seems to rule and to lead the way and have in mind the fine and divine" (δοκεῖ ἄρχειν καὶ ἡγεῖσθαι καὶ ἔννοιαν ἔχειν περὶ καλῶν καὶ θείων: 1177a14–15) On a minimal reading, contemplative *nous* rules as an honorary figurehead: other human life-functions subserve it, even if contemplative *nous* does nothing itself

² Broadie (1991: 396).

actively to *direct or guide* those lower powers.³ Yet this reading of 1177a14–15 encounters difficulty. The verb *archein* often signifies the power to direct and guide; and the appearance of *hêgeisthai* confirms this sense. Liddell and Scott ([1889] 2001) cite some of *hêgeisthai*'s following definitions: to go before; to lead the way for; to guide; to conduct; to lead an army or fleet; to be the leader or commander of. Thus, earlier, in a different context, Aristotle earlier identifies the leading part of the soul (τὸ ἡγούμενον) as the choosing part of the soul (τὸ προαιρούμενον: *EN* III.3, 1113a6–7). That is not to say that in *EN* X.7, Aristotle thinks that contemplative *nous* actively guides by making choices. But given *hêgeisthai*'s ordinary connotations, 1177a14–15 more naturally suggests that contemplative *nous* actively guides in some way. Further, 1177a14–15 suggests that contemplative *nous* does so insofar as it has fine and divine objects.⁴

(2) *Metaphysics* A.2 holds that the *sophos*'s authoritativeness signals his wisdom. The theoretically wise person *qua* wise is capable of *ordering*; he properly rules, not obeys (982a17–19).⁵ By analogy, *sophia* is the most sovereign kind of understanding (ἀρχικωτάτη δὲ τῶν ἐπιστημῶν), for it grasps to what end each thing should be done (γινωρίζουσα τίνος ἕνεκέν ἐστι πρακτέον ἕκαστον: 982b5–6). The theoretically wise person knows the good of each thing, since the good is one of the primary causes (982b4–10). *Metaphysics* B.2 likewise describes *sophia* as the “most sovereign and most leading” (ἀρχικωτάτη καὶ ἡγεμονικωτάτη) of the sciences (996b10–14). So, Aristotle apparently thinks that contemplation can authoritatively guide one's action in light of a certain *understanding* of the good – in particular, god – that such contemplation provides.

W.D. Ross struggles to make sense of the thought that *sophia* can be authoritatively guiding: “an argument which could only prove ethics or politics to be the highest wisdom is used to prove metaphysics to be so.”⁶ Thus, he tries to explain away what Aristotle explicitly says. On Ross'

³ Cf. Cooper ([1975] 1986: 175) on *nous*'s authoritativeness in this passage. See my comments in [Section 5.1](#).

⁴ Gauthier and Jolif (2002: 875) suggest that the distinction between practical and contemplative *nous* does not appear at 1177a14–15. Instead, they contend, Aristotle talks here, in general, about the thinking part of the human soul. I agree that Aristotle sometimes speaks about *nous* in general terms as something like reason as a general power. In the immediately surrounding context, however, Aristotle speaks of *nous* as the most divine of our capacities (1177a15–16); he insists that its activity in accord with its proper virtue is contemplative (1177a18); and he suggests that its virtue is *sophia* (1177a24). Hence, Aristotle has in mind contemplative *nous*, or, at least, the thinking part of the soul *qua* contemplative (which, again, differs in kind from this part *qua* practical). Even if Gauthier and Jolif are right, Aristotle still identifies contemplative *nous* as an aspect of our guiding part.

⁵ καὶ τὴν ἀρχικωτέραν τῆς ὑπηρετούσης μᾶλλον σοφίαν· οὐ γὰρ δεῖν ἐπιτάττεσθαι τὸν σοφὸν ἀλλ' ἐπιτάττειν, καὶ οὐ τοῦτον ἐτέρω πείθεσθαι, ἀλλὰ τούτῳ τὸν ἥττον σοφόν.

⁶ Ross (1924: I, 121).

reading, Aristotle's identifying *sophia* as authoritatively guiding in *Metaphysics* A.2 "is a statement of ἔνδοξα, so that some looseness in the thought may be expected."⁷

In response, Ross is correct that Aristotle does survey the *endoxa* about contemplative wisdom. Yet Aristotle shows no sign in *Metaphysics* A.1–2 of rejecting this, or any other, *endoxon* about *sophia*'s authoritative guidingness that he considers there. (a) On the contrary, Aristotle's account of *sophia* in these chapters accounts for these *endoxa*. (b) Aristotle retains this point about *sophia*'s authoritativeness later in *Metaphysics* B.2, 996b12–14. (c) The point about *sophia*'s sovereignty coheres with Aristotle's more general view that practical and productive sciences are subordinate to theoretical sciences (see, e.g., *Metaphysics* E.1, 1026a22–23). (d) Finally, we can reject the assumption that generates Ross' worry. Aristotle's argument need not prove only ethics or politics to be the highest wisdom: not, at any rate, if Aristotle thinks that *sophia qua metaphysics* is necessary for possessing practical wisdom – say, by informing practical wisdom.

As noted earlier, *Metaphysics* A.1–2 invites useful comparison with Aristotle's *Protrepticus*. More specifically, the *Protrepticus* emphasizes that philosophy – as a "possession and use of *sophia*" (6, 40.2–3/B53; cf. 6, 37.7–9/B8) – is among "the ordering" (αἱ ἐπιτάττουσαι) and "more leading" (ἡγεμονικωτέρας) kinds of knowledge (6, 37.14–15/B9). Only philosophy, so understood, has within itself "unerring, ordering wisdom" (ἀναμάρτητον ἐπιτακτικὴν φρόνησιν: 6, 37.21/B9). As we will see in [Section 7.6](#), *Protrepticus* 10 also endorses, and fully elaborates, the thought that metaphysics is authoritatively guiding.⁸

(3) In this context, *EE* VIII.3 raises its own puzzles. Here, Aristotle divides human nature into ruling and ruled elements, and he holds that human nature's ruling element rules in two ways – first, as medicine rules, second, as health does. Medicine, an ordering ruler, rules for the sake of health, a nonordering ruler. Similar subordination holds, Aristotle says, in the case of "the contemplative" part (τὸ θεωρητικόν): "for god is not an ordering ruler, but that for the sake of which practical wisdom issues orders" (οὐ γὰρ ἐπιτακτικῶς ἄρχων ὁ θεός, ἀλλ' οὗ ἕνεκα ἡ φρόνησις ἐπιτάττει: 1249b13–15).

⁷ Ross (1924: I, 122).

⁸ On these passages, and Aristotle's views concerning the architectonic character of theoretical sciences (in relation to practical and productive sciences), see M. Johnson (2015: 168–175). One might reject this appeal to the *Protrepticus* on the grounds that protreptics argue dialectically from premises that their authors need not accept. I address this worry in [Section 7.5](#).

In *EE* V.13 (= *EN* VI.13), 1145a6–11, Aristotle holds that *phronêsis* issues orders for the sake of *sophia* and the better element of the soul. On this basis, one might be tempted to read *EE* VIII.3 (1) as identifying “the contemplative” part as contemplative *nous*; (2) as holding that, *qua* divine, contemplative *nous* is something like god in the human soul; and (3) as insisting that practical wisdom issues orders for contemplative *nous*’ sake.⁹ On this reading, Aristotle describes contemplative *nous* very differently in *EE* VIII.3 from how he describes it in the other passages I have just examined. For on this reading of *EE* VIII.3, contemplative *nous* is in *no way* an order-issuing ruler, and so, seemingly lacking any powers of authoritative guidance.

Yet nothing commits us to this reading of *EE* VIII.3. For by “the contemplative” part, Aristotle could also mean something like *nous* as such, i.e., reason as a general power with both contemplative and practical aspects.¹⁰ In *DA* II.4, Aristotle says that it would be proper to call the *threptikon* “generative,” for reproduction is the common end of the *threptikon*’s nutritive and reproductive aspects (416b23–25). Similarly, Aristotle may well identify the power of *nous* as such as “contemplative” here because contemplation is this element’s common end: both practical *nous* (by arranging practical affairs) and contemplative *nous* (as a power) exist for the sake of contemplation (an activity).

On this second reading, then, we do better to understand “god” as Aristotle’s Prime Mover, the nonordering ruling principle for the sake of which reason as a general power rules nonrational desire and the lower elements of the whole human soul. The (broadly) contemplative part – reason as a general power – rules nonrational desire so that the whole soul is capable of contemplating god, which serves as the aim of the whole soul, a system of life-functions organized around contemplation. On this reading, *EE* VIII.3 coheres with the other passages I have explored; and this reading is independently plausible. But on this reading, contemplative *nous*, insofar as it exists within human souls, still belongs to the human soul’s ruling and ordering part. And so, we should expect that contemplative *nous*, as a part of this element, contributes toward this element’s capacity to issue orders. To this extent, we should expect contemplative *nous* to be authoritatively guiding.

Two considerations speak strongly against the first reading, and in favor of the second reading. (a) *EE* VIII.3 says only that a human being has

⁹ On this reading – as attributed to Dirlmeier – see Woods (1992: 183).

¹⁰ On this alternative reading – as attributed to Verdenius and Rowe – see Woods (1992: 183). See also Kenny (1992: 97–98).

ruling and ruled elements (1249b9–10). It does not say that the intellectual element has ruling and ruled elements. True, Aristotle does think that practical *nous* is subordinate to contemplative *nous* in the human soul. But Aristotle's point in the immediate context concerns how the soul's ruling element stands in relation to the rest of the human soul.¹¹ (b) *EE* II.1 offers independent support for this alternative reading. There, Aristotle identifies the intellectual virtues as excellences of that part of the soul which, having reason, issues orders (ὁ ἐπιτακτικὸν ἐστὶ τῆς ψυχῆς ἣ λόγον ἔχει: 1220a8–10). Moreover, Aristotle twice highlights *sophia* as a virtue of this part (1220a6, 12).

I recognize that, in identifying *sophia* as more authoritative than *phronêsis*, *EE* V.13 (= *EN* VI.13), 1145a6–11 does not highlight any active guidance that *sophia* offers. Instead, this passage portrays *sophia* as authoritative over *phronêsis* *qua* end, not *qua* ruler. *Sophia* bears the same relation to *phronêsis*, Aristotle says, that health bears to the art of medicine. This passage does not offer evidence for *sophia* as authoritative *qua* ordering ruler. Yet 1145a6–11 is, nevertheless, consistent with *EE* II.1's earlier intimations that *sophia* is authoritative *qua* ruler. The conclusion to *EE* V, I note, is concise and abrupt, and Aristotle does not elaborate on his claims for *sophia*'s authoritativeness. With the health/medicine analogy, Aristotle may simply be emphasizing *certain features* of *sophia*'s authoritativeness (including *sophia*'s end-status), not all of them. (The passage at 1145a6–11 focuses, after all, on *sophia* and *phronêsis* as virtues. It does not explicitly discuss the parts of the soul for which they are virtues. But contemplative *nous* is the authoritative element of a compound system; health is not.)

(4) I turn to *MM* I.34's steward/master analogy (1198b13–20), which parallels *EE* V.13 (= *EN* VI.13). In comparing *phronêsis* to a steward and *sophia* to a master, the analogy might seem to militate against any possibility that contemplative *nous* actively guides anything.¹² For on this analogy, the steward arranges the master's affairs so that the latter can freely pursue his ends. The analogy, then, might seem to portray *sophia* and its activity as free from any burdens of providing active guidance over lower activities. Yet notice that the master in this analogy has ultimate authority over the household. The master, in other words, is in a position to hire

¹¹ See Woods (1992: 183) (following Verdenius).

¹² Like Cooper ([1973] 1999), I assume that the *MM* is at least a reliable source of Aristotelian views, even if not by Aristotle. Simpson (2014: xi–xxviii) – who vigorously defends the work's authenticity (as a simplified, introductory treatise intended for a general audience) – observes that, in antiquity, the work's authenticity was never doubted.

(or replace) the steward, to delegate authority, and – especially – to give general orders, which the steward may specify further by exercising practical judgment. The master does not involve himself with the nitty-gritty details of managing household affairs – as we should expect – but nothing in the analogy suggests that the master offers no guidance to the steward. Indeed, it would be strange to *deny* that the master offers any such guidance.

(5) *Politics* I.5 describes the relative fitness of certain parts of the human soul to rule other parts. It is natural, Aristotle says, “for the passionate portion (τῷ παθητικῷ μορίῳ) [to be ruled] by the intellect and the portion having reason” (ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦ καὶ τοῦ μορίου τοῦ λόγον ἔχοντος: 1254b8–9). Should one read the *kai* here epexegetically, so that Aristotle is just referring, as in *EN* I.13, to reason as a general power? If the *kai* is epexegetic, Aristotle again holds that reason (as a general power) is fit to govern nonrational desire. In this case, Aristotle implicitly includes contemplative *nous* as possessing such a guiding role. One, of course, may simply *assume* that Aristotle means practical *nous* by “the intellect and the part of the soul having reason” – but only if one already assumes that contemplative *nous* is utterly inert and incapable of offering guidance. If, however, the *kai* is not epexegetic, Aristotle distinguishes contemplative from practical *nous*. In this case, he holds that the reason-responsive, nonrational aspect of the human soul – i.e., “the passionate portion” (cf. *Politics* III.15, 1286a17–18) – is governed both by contemplative *nous* (i.e., “the intellect”) and by practical *nous* (“the portion having reason,” perhaps of a calculative sort). Whether the *kai* in 1254b8–9 is epexegetic, then, Aristotle shows some signs of granting contemplative *nous* an actively guiding role.

7.2 Aristotle on Ethical Development: From the “That” to the “Why”

How, then, might contemplative *nous* authoritatively guide practical reasoning? Consider Aristotle’s account of how one becomes a virtuous agent.¹³ Although Aristotle denies that virtue is, strictly speaking, an art or craft (τέχνη), he nevertheless compares learning to be good to learning an art. Both require practice (*EN* II.1, 1103a31–b2). Through practice in performing virtuous deeds – a practice aided by the corrective influence of parents and the law, both of which punish vicious

¹³ I generally follow Burnyeat (1980: 69–92) and Annas (1993: 67–68). On decency, see Cooper (2010: 218–220).

actions – the ethical learner attains certain insights into virtuous action. Thus, a good upbringing to some degree refines an agent's natural capacity for cleverness into the virtue of *phronêsis* (*EN* VI.12, 1144a28–31). The well-reared agent sees *that* certain actions and a certain character are good, even if he does not know *why* they are good: “For [the] starting point [is] the ‘that’ (τὸ ὅτι), and if this [is] sufficiently apparent, there will be no need besides of the ‘why’ (τοῦ διότι); and such [a well-reared agent] has [the starting point] or would acquire [the] starting point easily” (*EN* I.4, 1095b6–8). Grasping *that* certain deeds and qualities of character are virtuous, fine, and choice-worthy for themselves, the young learner attains a state of *basic decency*. He performs certain kinds of actions because he can see *that* they are called for and *that* they are worth performing. Still, the young learner tends to err on account of insufficient life-experience (*EN* I.3, 1095a4–9). He can progress further, however, through additional practice. As he grows older, gains experience, and matures, he will – all things being equal – become *reliably decent*.

But reliable decency, as good a state as it is, does not constitute virtue. To see why, note again the similarities between art and virtue. Certain makers (viz., manual workers) can attain good results through guiding their work by practical experience and through a kind of habituation (*Metaphysics* A.1, 981b4–5). Aristotle allows that agents who lack *technê*, yet who are guided solely by practical experience, not only can perform well in particular situations, but can perform better than those who lack practical experience. Whereas artisans know the universal, the merely experienced know particulars. And human agents find themselves thrown into particular situations in which they must respond appropriately. Knowledge of particulars, then, is more immediately salient than knowledge of universals. Thus, if “someone has the account without experience (ἄνευ τῆς ἐμπειρίας ἔχει τὸν λόγον), and knows (γινωρίζει) the universal, but is ignorant of the particular in this, he will often go astray” (*Metaphysics* A.1, 981a20–23).

Art in the strict sense, however, requires more than an experienced grasp of the “that,” or an incidental reliability for producing certain results within art-relative parameters of excess and deficiency. On the contrary, art, strictly speaking, requires a reasoned understanding of the “why,” an awareness of *why* certain actions are to be done and *why* certain products are good (*Metaphysics* A.1, 981a24–26; *An. Post.* II.19, 100a6–9). Hence, master artisans – whose work is truly *excellent* – will know the “why” as well and will be wiser, “more *sophos*” (σοφωτέρους) than other artisans (*Metaphysics* A.1, 981b5). To possess art, as opposed to being decently

competent, practitioners must understand what they are doing and why they do it. Such understanding is internal to skilled performers. *Qua* skilled, artisans do not depend on others to provide this knowledge.

On Aristotle's art analogy, the same points apply to ethical virtue. Ethical excellence – excellence in passion and action – also requires a grasp of the “why,” an understanding of why certain actions and character traits are good, fine, and choiceworthy for themselves. Thus, even incidentally reliable dispositions to intermediate actions – actions that happen to attain the mean between excess and deficiency in action and passion – prove insufficient for ethical virtue. Instead, ethical virtue requires one to perform and respond as a virtuous person would (*EN* II.4, 1105b5–9). One must not only decide on certain actions for themselves and perform those actions from a steady state of character; rather, one must perform those actions *knowingly* (εἰδώς: *EN* II.4, 1105a26–33). Virtuous agency requires one to act on the basis of one's own internalized understanding of why certain actions are choiceworthy and such as to be performed. To rely on the understanding of others who provide counsel is to remain in the position of a learner.¹⁴

Before moving ahead, I offer two notes of clarification:

(1) Aristotle writes that “with respect to the virtues, knowing (εἰδέναι) is of little or no power,” whereas (a) choosing actions for their own sake and (b) acting from a steady state of character are crucial (*EN* II.4, 1105a34–b5). On Aristotle's view, understanding is of little or no importance to virtuous agency *relatively speaking*. Understanding alone does not suffice for virtuous agency; but understanding still plays a necessary role. Agents with *both* experience *and* a grasp of the “why” will presumably perform best: Aristotle recognizes them as more honorable and authoritative than other agents (*Metaphysics* A.1, 981a24–b10; A.2, 982a17–19). (I address this claim more fully in [Section 7.3](#).)

(2) Aristotle insists that “virtue makes the end correct, *phronêsis* the things in relation to the end” (*EN* VI.12, 1144a7–9). Perhaps, then, the virtuous need not explicitly *understand* proper ends to act well. Instead, perhaps the tendencies of well-reared virtuous agents to seek out such ends suffice.

In reply, Aristotle agrees that both natural and habituated virtue provide us with the correct starting points (a certain grasp of “the that”). But such a grasp of ends is limited. Through natural and habituated virtue, we

¹⁴ Cf. Inglis (2014: 283). On self-direction and happiness, cf. Whiting (1988: 42–43).

attain, at best, “correct believing about the starting point” (ἀλλ’ ἀρετὴ ἢ φυσικὴ ἢ ἐθιστὴ τοῦ ὀρθοδοξεῖν περὶ τὴν ἀρχήν: *EN* VII.8, 1151a15–19). While correct belief about the end is indispensable, Aristotle thinks, we can and should attain fuller understanding of these ends. Such understanding enables us to attend to such ends with a clear view of their good-making features. So informed, we can choose and enjoy such ends, most of all, for themselves.¹⁵

7.3 Theoretical Understanding as a Condition for Complete Virtue

Aristotle, then, adopts an *understanding requirement* for complete (or perfect) virtue: one must grasp the “why” to possess complete virtue – *phronêsis* and authoritative ethical virtue – as opposed to mere cleverness and either natural virtue or decency. To grasp the “why” fully, however, one requires *theoretical* understanding of human nature and the human good. Such an understanding makes possible the fullest grasp of why certain actions and traits of character are choiceworthy. Aristotle develops this thought throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

At the beginning of the work, Aristotle insists that an awareness (γνώσις) of the nature of the human good will be of significant importance “with respect to life” (πρὸς τὸν βίον). “[J]ust like archers having a target (σκοπὸν),” Aristotle says, “we would be more [likely] to happen upon the correct [mark]” (*EN* I.2, 1094a22–24). He rejects the usefulness of appealing to a Platonic Idea of the Good to elucidate the human good (*EN* I.6). Instead, in *EN* I.7, Aristotle offers a preliminary sketch of the human good by reference to the human function. To understand the human good, Aristotle suggests, we require a certain theoretical understanding of human nature, (i.e., a grasp of its universal and unchanging features: cf. *EN* VI.1, 1139a6–8).

EN I.13 picks up this theme. Aristotle explicitly compares (1) the skilled doctor’s scientific understanding of the healthy body and (2) the practically wise legislator’s theoretical understanding of the healthy soul.

By human virtue we mean not that of the body but that of the soul; and happiness also we call an activity of soul. But if this is so, clearly the student of politics must know (εἰδέναι) somehow the facts about soul, as the man who is to heal the eyes must know about the whole body also; and all the more since politics is more prized and better than medicine; but even among

¹⁵ With reference to Plato, see Irwin (1995: 234–236). With reference to Aristotle, see Irwin (2007: 188).

doctors the best educated spend much labour on acquiring knowledge of the body (περὶ τὴν τοῦ σώματος γνῶσιν). The student of politics, then, must contemplate the soul, and must contemplate it with these objects in view (θεωρητέον δὴ καὶ τῷ πολιτικῷ περὶ ψυχῆς, θεωρητέον δὲ τούτων χάριν), and do so just to the extent which is sufficient for the matters we are investigating (πρὸς τὰ ζητούμενα); for further precision is perhaps something more labourious than the questions under discussion (τῶν προκειμένων) require (1102a15–26; ROT, slightly emended).

The “best educated” doctors benefit from a scientific understanding of health, the virtue of the body. Such doctors, who have some broader understanding of nature, differ from (1) uneducated doctors, who follow the instructions of educated doctors as do medical orderlies, and from (2) doctors with some restricted education in medicine (see *Politics* III.11, 1282a3–4).¹⁶ By “doctor,” then, Aristotle refers broadly to those who aim to cure. But he reserves “doctor” in the strict, or authoritative, sense for the best-educated doctors with theoretical understanding. Such cultivated doctors proceed “more philosophically” (φιλοσοφωτέως) than the others (*De Sensu* I, 436a18–b2; *Resp.* 21, 480b26–28).¹⁷ The best-educated doctor’s understanding of the body is not some external imposition onto whatever medical skill that this doctor independently attains through practical experience. On the contrary, the best-educated doctor, *qua* doctor, requires such understanding. For the doctor *qua* doctor practices medicine most completely when guided by a scientific understanding of the body, its component parts, and the ordering of these parts that conduces to the body’s good functioning – a functioning that can be disrupted by excess and deficiency. The best-educated doctors grasp the causes of illness, health, and prescribe especially accurate cures on that basis.

Similarly, practically wise legislators, who deliberate about the good of the city and its citizens, benefit from a broadly contemplative, philosophical understanding of the virtue of the human soul. Such understanding does not interfere with the legislator’s early ethical education; instead, it completes that education. Practically wise legislators thus benefit from understanding the soul, its parts, and the ordering of these parts conducive to the soul’s excellent functioning (1102a15–23; cf. *Politics* VII.14, 1332a36–39), a functioning that can also be disrupted by excess and

¹⁶ On Aristotle’s distinction among kinds of doctors, see Kraut (2002: 287–288), who discusses Aristotle’s views in relation to Plato, *Laws* IV.720a–c.

¹⁷ I owe the reference to James Lennox. For further discussion, see M. Johnson (2012: 108–109).

deficiency, i.e., vice. The *phronimos* grasps the whole human soul, just as the doctor who heals eyes grasps the whole body (πᾶν σῶμα: *EN* I.13, 1102a20).¹⁸

Aristotle returns to these issues at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Addressing the question of how people can be made good, Aristotle emphasizes the role of theoretical understanding. By grasping general principles about the body, well-educated doctors – like similarly educated athletic trainers – can attend best to particular patients. Likewise, if anyone can make people good, it is the person possessing understanding, viz., of the human good (*EN* X.9, 1180b13–23).

EN I.13 and X.9 address only the understanding required by legislators, who exercise practical *nous* according to *phronêsis* on behalf of the city's wellbeing. Hence, Aristotle's medical and trainer analogies might seem to apply only to politicians. Yet both legislators and individual practical agents would benefit from a theoretical understanding of the human good. If we are going to attain the human good, we should grasp what it is (*EN* I.2, 1094a22–24). *Phronêsis* and political science differ in being: the former concerns the happiness of individuals, while the latter concerns the happiness of cities. Yet as perfections of practical *nous*, *phronêsis* and political science are the same state (*EN* VI.8, 1141b23–24). Insofar as the legislator's practical *nous* is perfected through the legislator's theoretical understanding of the human good, individual agents, and not only legislators, would benefit from such understanding.¹⁹

How much theoretical understanding does the *phronimos* require, however? At first glance, *EN* I.13 would seem to suggest that the *phronimos* requires only a basic theoretical understanding of the human soul. The *Nicomachean Ethics*, after all, refrains from offering a systematic account of the human soul. In this and related contexts, Aristotle explicitly limits how much precision his audience should expect (*EN* I.13, 1102a25–32; cf. I.6, 1096b26–31; X.8, 1178a20–23).²⁰

¹⁸ See Kenny (1978: 181) and Shields (2015: 237). On Aristotle's medical analogy, see Jaeger (1957) and Nussbaum (1994: ch. 2). Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 270b–c: one needs to grasp the nature of the body if one is to possess the art of medicine as opposed to a merely “empirical and artless practice” (trans. Nehamas and Woodruff, in Cooper (1997). On the doctor's need to possess knowledge of human nature, see *On Regimen* I.2, from the Hippocratic corpus. (M. Johnson [2012: 119–120] identifies material in this work that shows parallels in Aristotle's works.)

¹⁹ The difference between practical wisdom and political science narrows when one considers that one's private good is inseparably bound with the good of one's community. See Inglis (2014: 267), citing *EN* VI.8, 1142a9–12.

²⁰ See Scott (2015: ch. 7). Broadie (1991: 61) and Salmieri (2009: 334n25) argue that the Aristotelian politician requires only a basic grasp of psychology. Gottlieb (2009: 177–182) argues that the politician requires knowledge of general principles of psychology, but need

Yet I see no reason to think that Aristotle rejects his praise of carefully educated doctors from *Politics* III.11 and *De Sensu* 1. Therefore, I contend, Aristotle brackets more detailed psychological inquiry in the *Nicomachean Ethics* momentarily, for pedagogical reasons. Further precision about the parts of the human soul, and how they interrelate, “makes no difference for the present purpose” (οὐθὲν διαφέρει πρὸς τὸ παρόν: 1102a31–32) – that is, for the present aims of this stage of the *Nicomachean Ethics qua* investigation into political science (cf. I.2, 1094b10–11). This part of the work pursues specific inquiries that the aspiring politician can explore in less-than-fully precise terms; hence, there is no (immediate) need to address “the questions under discussion” (τῶν προκειμένων) with full precision (1102a24–26). Here, Aristotle follows his earlier advice of avoiding precision when necessary to avoid digressions (ὅπως μὴ τὰ πάρεργα τῶν ἔργων πλείω γίνηται: *EN* I.7, 1098a26–33). Such bracketing is consistent, however, with Aristotle’s leaving a more detailed account of the human soul for another day. Thus, instead of dwelling on the perplexities of theoretical psychology *right then*, Aristotle advises his audience to avail themselves of other adequate treatments of these topics (*EN* I.13, 1102a26–27). Moreover, Aristotle’s realistic recognition that some of his audience members lack deeper philosophical inclinations perhaps also colors his advice. Recognizing their limitations, Aristotle seeks to encourage these audience members to pursue *some* theoretical understanding of the soul, without making the contemplation requirement seem too demanding. By modeling the practically wise legislator on the well-educated doctor (*EN* I.13, 1102a21–23), however, Aristotle suggests that fuller understanding is necessary if one is to be a complete *phronimos*. One who really understood natural causes and principles would stand to be a *phronimos* most of all.²¹

7.4 Theoretical Understanding and *Horoi* for Practical Reasoning

The Aristotelian *phronimos* grasps not only the ethical “that,” but also the ethical “why.” But grasping the “why” requires theoretical understanding of human nature and the human good. Such theoretical

not grasp metaphysics. Leunissen (2015: 225–231) argues that the Aristotelian politician requires general educatedness in psychology.

²¹ Shields (2015: 252) argues that the Aristotelian politician requires “detailed and intimate” understanding of psychology and metaphysics, in particular, to understand the human function. In what follows, I defend a view akin to Shields’, though on different grounds. Despite my different emphases, I take my own reading to be consistent with Shields’.

understanding, in turn, provides access to certain *horoi* – i.e., standards, definitions, or boundary markers – by reference to which the *phronimos* judges best.

The *Eudemian Ethics* is most explicit on these points. Thus, according to *EE* I.2, it is a sign “of great folly” (ἄφροσύνης πολλῆς) not to organize one’s life around a certain end, viz., whatever constitutes living well (1214b10–14). Therefore, “it is necessary first to define in oneself” (δεῖ πρῶτον ἐν αὐτῷ διορίσασθαι) what pertains to living well. *EE* V.1 (= *EN* VI.1) develops this point further, referring back to Aristotle’s discussion of the mean. “For in all the states [of character] discussed, just as in other [cases], there is a certain target (τις σκοπὸς) toward which the one having reason, gazing, tightens and slackens, and there is a certain boundary marker (ὅρος) of the mean [states], which we say to be in between excess and deficiency, being according to correct reason (ὀρθὸς λόγος)” (1138b21–25). Here, the *phronimos* has a certain target in acting, viz., the human good, happiness, or living well (cf. *EN* I.2, 1094a18–26). In acting for the sake of this target, the *phronimos* aims to attain the mean between excess and deficiency. What constitutes the mean for which the *phronimos* acts, in turn, is determined by correct reason. This final claim about correct reason, however, is “not at all clear” (1138b26).

To understand Aristotle’s worry, consider the medical analogy that he introduces. The doctor has a target, viz., the health of the body. In seeking this target, the good doctor aims to attain the mean between excess and deficiency. What constitutes this medical mean, in turn, is determined by correct medical reasoning. Yet we require some substantive understanding of the boundary marker that defines correct medical reasoning (beyond, say, whatever accords with the art of medicine). Likewise, in living well, we require a substantive grasp of the boundary marker that defines correct reason (1138b29–34). Thus, Aristotle says, we must perform two tasks: (1) We must articulate what correct reason is. (2) We must also articulate the *horos* – the boundary marker, standard, or definition – that defines correct reason (καὶ διωρισμένον τίς ἐστίν ὁ ὀρθὸς λόγος καὶ τούτου τίς ὅρος: 1138b34; cf. *EE* II.5, 1222b7–8).

EE V.13 (= *EN* VI.13) accomplishes task (1) by identifying correct reason as either *phronêsis* or reason according to *phronêsis* (1144b24–25; b27–28). Yet Aristotle must also attempt task (2), lest he keep us in the dark about what boundary marker or standard defines correct reason. Again, suppose that Aristotle told us nothing about correct reason except that it either is according to, or defined by, *phronêsis*. If so, then Aristotle would be

saying that the *phronimos* aims at a mean defined by *phronêsis*. This claim is not entirely empty, but it is not exactly informative.²²

EE VIII.3 explicitly highlights this problem, and reiterates the need to articulate the *horos* that defines the practically wise person's judgment. The *phronimos*, like the skilled doctor, grasps a boundary marker for judging excess and deficiency. He grasps standards that determine certain courses of treatment as excessive, deficient, or proper. To say that this boundary marker is constituted by correct reason, however, is to say little of content:

But since there is a certain boundary marker (τις ὁρος) also for the doctor – in relation to which he discerns the things restoring the healthy body and not, and in relation to which each [thing] up to a point is to be done, and [if] well, [is] healthy, but if less or more, [is] no longer [healthy] – thus also for the good [man] about actions and choices of things good by nature but not praiseworthy, it is necessary [for there] to be a certain boundary marker (τινα . . . ὅρον) both of state and of choice and about avoidance in excess and deficiency of wealth and of good fortune. In the earlier [discussions], then, it was said [to be] the [boundary marker] as reason [determines]....But this [is] true, but not illuminating (1249a21–b6).

Therefore, one must provide a nontrivial account of the boundary marker that defines correct reason – here, at least, regarding the ethically virtuous mean with respect to external goods. Just as the doctor grasps a *horos* – a standard or boundary marker – by reference to which he determines what is healthy for a body, so too the practically wise person grasps a *horos* of the human good by reference to which he determines what is good both for himself and the city. Articulating this *horos* enables the *phronimos* to attain his target of securing happiness, just as articulating the medical *horos* enables the doctor to attain his target of securing health.

Here, one's theoretical understanding becomes useful. Through contemplation, I suggest, *phronimoi* grasp certain standards or boundary markers of the human good, which then inform such agents' practical reasoning. But is this suggestion anachronistic? Perhaps the demand for a theoretically grasped “standard” to guide action is peculiar to modern Western moral philosophy, and simply missing from ancient Greek ethics. Consider, for instance, the modern focus on such “standards” as the

²² This is one reason why we should not read the *καὶ* in *EN* VI.1, 1138b34 as epexegetical. Contrary to, e.g., Broadie and Rowe (2002: 358–360) and Simpson (2013a: 322), I follow Greenwood (1909: 168), Kenny (1978: 180–181), Peterson (1988: 233), and Gauthier and Jolif (2002: 438–439) in reading Aristotle as asking two questions here. A worry: my reading might seem to imply that any *horos* of correct reason distinct from correct reason must be a standard or rule from which practical reason is simply to deduce correct actions. (So Broadie, Rowe, and Simpson suggest.) As I argue later, however, one can accept my reading without accepting a deductive picture of practical reasoning.

principle of utility in modern consequentialism, or the categorical imperative in modern deontology. Perhaps Aristotle's ethics, with its strong attention to situated judgment, has little or no room for such standards in its account of virtuous practical reasoning.

In response, voluminous textual evidence from Aristotle's ethical works – which I have already provided – shows that Aristotle *is* concerned to identify standards of the human good, which define the *phronimos*' judgment. This point will become even clearer later in this chapter, when I turn to the *Protrepticus*. Moreover, nothing is distinctively “modern” about the search for such standards. In multiple Platonic dialogues, after all, Socrates seeks definitions of the various virtues. Indeed, Aristotle praises Socrates for introducing this concern with definition into philosophy (*Metaphysics* A.6, 987b1–3; M.4, 1078b22–30). Aristotle believes that situated judgment is necessary for practically wise, ethically virtuous action. But he allows a grasp of general standards of the human good to inform such judgment *qua* practically wise.²³

In holding that the *phronimos* must understand the human good theoretically, Aristotle need not accept a crude, deductivist model of practical reasoning. In indicating that *phronêsis* requires theoretical understanding of the human good, that is, Aristotle need not think that *phronimoi* require a kind of rule-book or decision procedure for practical reasoning, or a blueprint from which they can read off the right actions to perform.²⁴ Such a crude picture of practical reasoning is as false for good individual practical judgment as it is for the good medical judgment of doctors. Instead, theoretical understanding informs or shapes the *phronimos*' way of perceiving particular situations. Like the perception of particular figures as triangles, *phronêsis* is a kind of perception of particulars, albeit infused with an understanding of general *horoi* of the human good (*EN* VI.8, 1142a27–30). The *phronimos*' theoretical understanding of the human good, and the standards of the human good that he derives from such understanding, then, need not interfere with the *phronimos*' practical reasoning or restrict the role of practical experience in decision-making. On the contrary, such understanding sharpens the *phronimos*' perspective, enabling him to attend to salient features of situations.

²³ Nor is the search for such standards uniquely Western. On ways in which Confucian thinkers – including Confucius, Mengzi, and Zhu Xi – seek out standards of character and action, see Walker (2016). The early Confucians' opponent, Mozi (c. 400s–300s B.C.E.), also highlights the need for standards (*fa*) for practical judgment and governing. See Mozi, ch. 35 (in Ivanhoe and Van Norden [2005]). On Mohist *fa*, see Lai (2008: 63–68). On how theory in Aristotle aims to “inform,” but not “replace,” practical reasoning, see Salkever (1990, 7: 135–142).

²⁴ Contrary to, e.g., Broadie (1991: 198–202), McDowell (1997), and Hursthouse (1999: 137).

Further, as discussed in [Section 7.3](#), Aristotle admonishes his audience not to seek more exactness from an account of the good than the subject matter allows. An explicit understanding of the good, then, will lack enough detail to provide a decision procedure for action. *Phronimoi* must adapt flexibly to the situations in which they find themselves. Finally, in accepting that the *phronimos* first requires a fund of practical experience, Aristotle does not expect an articulate grasp of the human good, *by itself*, to yield exact prescriptions for how to act in varying circumstances. Again, for Aristotle, grasping boundary markers of the human good is, at best, a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition, for practical wisdom. Theoretically understanding the human good plays an important, but limited, background role in practically wise choice.²⁵

7.5 Some Hortatory Remarks on the *Protrepticus*

Aristotle, then, thinks that practically wise agents will benefit from grasping a definition or boundary marker of the human good with sufficient content to inform action by defining and elucidating why actions attain the ethical mean. If contemplation can provide an agent cognitive access to such a *horos*, which delimits virtuous practical reasoning, contemplation can show itself useful in a robust, action-guiding sense. Contemplation, although distinct from practical reasoning, would complete practical reasoning. Contemplative *nous*, by extension, would authoritatively guide lower human functions. For now, I assume that this way of indicating contemplative *nous*' useful guidance is plausible. (I say more about these matters in [Section 10.2](#).) But does Aristotle himself ever explicitly identify contemplation as defined in [Chapter 1](#) as useful in this way?

Yes.

In [Section 2.5](#), I examined how two passages from *Protrepticus* 9 – 52.16–28/B42 and 53.15–26/B44 – defend contemplation's choiceworthiness

²⁵ Broadie describes the thought that the virtuous agent requires theoretical understanding of the human good as “utterly unrealistic” (1991: 201). She thus distinguishes two kinds of *phronêsis*, one required for ordinary agents, the other a more sophisticated *phronêsis* required for politicians (1991: 46–47). For responses to Broadie, see Kraut (1993), MacIntyre (2006), and Inglis (2014). On the need for virtuous agents to grasp general principles of the human good, see Nielsen (2015). Owens (1987: 9), Hughes (2001: 49–51), T. Sherman (2002) and (2006), and Wood (2011: 403–405) all identify contemplative *nous* as the power by which agents grasp the principles of excellent practical reasoning, though their specific accounts of how differ. Although my account differs from these other accounts in emphasis and detail, it remains, I believe, broadly consistent with them.

in the happiest life despite contemplation's uselessness. In offering an aristocratic defense of contemplation, they insist that contemplation's uselessness is consistent with contemplation's status as a highest end. But Isocrates' worries about contemplation's utility run deeper. His underlying worry, I take it, is that useless contemplation lacks choiceworthiness because it has no functional role in the life of a mortal human being. Thus, Isocrates takes a dim view of rival Platonic and Aristotelian philosophers who pursue "astronomy and geometry and studies of that sort" (*Antidosis* 261), and who thereby "promise to make their disciples all but immortal" (*Against the Sophists* 4). Given our mortal constraints and their weighty demands, Isocrates suggests, such theoretical studies are pointless and a waste of energy. They have no connection to the rest of human life, except, perhaps incidentally, as an instrumental "gymnastic of the mind," a propaedeutic for those practical studies that Isocrates identifies as more useful for the mortals that human beings are (*Antidosis* 265–266).²⁶

Protrepticus 9's arguments go part of the way toward answering Isocrates. But to meet Isocrates' worries fully, Aristotle must show that contemplation possesses some sort of *functional utility*. Thus, in a transitional passage linking text borrowed from the original *Protrepticus*, Iamblichus expresses a concern that seems implicit in Aristotle's text: "But since we converse with human beings and not with those who have the divine portion of life ready-to-hand, it is necessary to mix in with such exhortations some protreptics with a view to the political and practical life" (*Protrepticus* 6, 36.27–37.2/B7). Given human nature's mortal constraints, in other words, Aristotle thinks that he must show how contemplation harmonizes with the rest of human life, and that he must demonstrate its practical benefits for mortal humanity. Similarly, *Protrepticus* 7 argues not only that "wisdom and cognition" (τὸ φρονεῖν καὶ τὸ γινώσκειν) are choiceworthy for their own sakes, as constitutive of human life, but that they are "also useful toward life (χρήσιμόν τε εἰς τὸν βίον), for nothing good comes about for us unless it is completed after we have reasoned and acted according to wisdom" (κατὰ φρόνησιν: 41.7–11/B41). This claim is most likely an Iamblichean paraphrase of Aristotle's text.²⁷ Yet it still reveals Aristotle's concerns.

In *Protrepticus* 10, Aristotle spells out how contemplation is useful. Contemplation, Aristotle argues, possesses such functional utility by providing cognitive access to *horoi* for practical reasoning. *Protrepticus* 10, then, explicitly confirms the general view of contemplation's authoritative

²⁶ Translations from Norlin.

²⁷ Hutchinson and Johnson, unpublished work A.

guidance for practical reasoning that I have been developing in this chapter. Before I examine *Protrepticus* 10's argument, I note that some may resist my appeal to the *Protrepticus* to address issues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Hence, I briefly address potential worries about my use of the *Protrepticus*.

According to a first worry, the principal remnants of Aristotle's *Protrepticus* that we possess are some suspect passages in Iamblichus. Perhaps, then, we should avoid the *Protrepticus* altogether.²⁸ Against this unacceptably hardline position, the recent work of Hutchinson and Johnson provides a detailed defense of the authentically Aristotelian status of the relevant passages in Iamblichus. We should show care when using the *Protrepticus*. Yet we should nevertheless use it – especially when the *Protrepticus* provides helpful resources for addressing the utility question, a question that cuts deep.

Grant, then, that we possess authentic fragments from the *Protrepticus*. Even so, a second worry goes, the *Protrepticus* promises to have limited value for elucidating Aristotle's own views. The problem is a generic one. Philosophical protreptics aim to turn non-philosophers toward philosophy. To do so, they must appeal to the concerns of non-philosophers – concerns that true philosophers may reject. Thus, even if the *Protrepticus* argues for contemplation's utility, Aristotle himself need not believe that contemplation is useful. Perhaps Aristotle offers such an argument merely tactically, to reach audiences where they stand.²⁹

In response, I grant that some philosophers might use merely tactical protreptic arguments. Further, Aristotle insists that protreptics, in urging audiences either to do or not to do something (*Rhetoric* I.3, 1358b8–10), should demonstrate that a certain pursuit is advantageous or better for the audience (1358b21–24; cf. *Rhetoric* I.6). So, he thinks that protreptics should reach audiences where they stand. Yet the *Protrepticus* is a reasonable source of Aristotle's own views. For Aristotle rejects the thought that protreptics should serve up any old arguments that promise to have persuasive appeal. On the contrary, Aristotle explicitly emphasizes the need for protreptic arguments to be true (or sound): "True arguments seem, then, most useful, not only with a view to knowledge, but with a view to life also; for since they harmonize with the facts they are believed, and so they exhort (προτρύπονται) those who understand them to live according to them" (*EN* X.1, 1172b3–7).³⁰ Protreptic arguments, Aristotle thinks, will meet their hortatory aims most effectively to the extent that

²⁸ See, e.g., Rabinowitz (1957). ²⁹ I owe this worry to Eric Brown.

³⁰ ROT, substituting "exhort" for "stimulate."

they are true, and for that reason, persuasive. Unless we have strong specific reason to think otherwise, then, we should assume that Aristotle endorses the *Protrepticus*' arguments. Moreover, the *Protrepticus*' specific arguments consistently apply views (e.g., about the soul, virtue, and happiness) that Aristotle presents in his other works, and which he evidently accepts.³¹

According to a third worry, the *Protrepticus* represents the work of a young Aristotle still in the grip of a Platonic influence later outgrown.³² Hence, any use of the *Protrepticus* should recognize its limited usefulness as a remnant from Aristotle's early intellectual development. In response, such strong developmentalist readings are open to, and have received, forceful challenge.³³ Weighing against the claim that the *Protrepticus* represents a superseded youthful Platonism in Aristotle's development is the evidence – compiled and discussed in [Chapter 6](#) – that the *Nicomachean Ethics*' views on virtue, moral psychology, and happiness show the pervasive influence of Plato's *Republic*. The *Nicomachean Ethics* makes little sense if one denies this influence. So, if some *Protrepticus* passages occasionally have a “Platonic” ring to them, we have no reason to dismiss them as alien to the thought of the mature Aristotle. In fact, one can turn this Platonic influence objection on its head. For to the extent that the *Nicomachean Ethics* shows an evident Platonic influence, the *Protrepticus* should be potentially illuminating about the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

According to yet a fourth worry, it is unsound to appeal to the *Protrepticus* to defend the *Nicomachean Ethics*' particular views on contemplation and happiness. The *Protrepticus*, after all, appears not to distinguish between contemplative and practical *nous*. So, the worry goes, the *Protrepticus* promises to be unhelpful for addressing philosophical issues the *Nicomachean Ethics* puts in one's way – especially if these questions concern the relationship between contemplative and practical *nous*.³⁴

³¹ For examples, see Hutchinson and Johnson (2005) and (2014). Writing about the *Protrepticus*, Gadamer (1928: 145) argues that one should not seek a philosophical position in a protreptic work, but only the position of philosophy in general. Aristotle, for his part, however, defends the latter by means of the former.

³² For a classic formulation, see Jaeger (1962: ch. 4). For an earlier – though similar – developmental thesis, see Case ([1910] 1996: 1–7). Depew (2004: 158) contends that “Aristotle's earliest extant works” – including the *Protrepticus* – “exhibit little more than the boiler-plate sublimatory rhetoric of Plato's middle period.”

³³ Against Jaeger's developmental thesis, see, e.g., Grene (1963: 26–34), Lachterman (1990), Gadamer (1986: 7–9), Gerson (2005: 47–49), Collins (2015: 246). Other kinds of developmentalism are possible: see Witt (1996) (on the developmental theses of Owen, Graham, and Irwin in relation to Jaeger's). But Jaeger's developmentalism informs most worry about the *Protrepticus*.

³⁴ On *EN* VI and its distinction between practical and contemplative intellect as “a public recantation of the Platonic views in the *Protrepticus*,” see Jaeger (1962: 81–85; 437–438; 445–451).

The *Protrepticus* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* might not always refer to the same phenomena. But aside from the fair amount of *terminological consistency* between the two works, these works show a strong degree of *argumentative and thematic consistency*. Most notably, both works hold that the happiest life is organized around contemplation, which both works identify as possessing a kind of aristocratic leisureliness. Hutchinson and Johnson offer a full catalog of other parallels between the *Protrepticus* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*.³⁵ True, the *Nicomachean Ethics* presents a more refined cartography of the soul than the *Protrepticus*. The former work, but not the latter, distinguishes sharply between contemplative and practical *nous*. Yet these points hardly demonstrate any substantial underlying disagreement between the *Protrepticus* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*.³⁶

To clarify: the *Protrepticus* does not always make *EN* VI's sharp distinctions between (1) *phronêsis* and *sophia* and (2) practical and contemplative *nous*. But nothing interesting need follow. In the *Protrepticus*, Aristotle faces Isocrates' challenges. Aristotle's speaking interchangeably between *sophia* and *phronêsis*, however, matches Isocrates' own seamless switching between terms. For instance, at *Antidosis* 270–271, Isocrates says that he will talk “about wisdom and philosophy” (περὶ δὲ σοφίας καὶ φιλοσοφίας). Isocrates goes on to describe wise men (σοφούς) and philosophers (φιλοσόφους) by the sort of wisdom (τοιαύτην φρόνησιν) they possess. Perfectly good contextual reasons explain why Aristotle speaks the way he does. He aims to respond to Isocrates, using Isocratean vocabulary.³⁷

It is unsurprising, then, if Aristotle elsewhere alters his formulations from the *Protrepticus*. Still, as argued in [Section 2.4](#), Aristotle's conception of wisdom in the *Protrepticus*, regardless of whatever term Aristotle uses for it, remains continuous with that of *Metaphysics* A.1–2. Moreover, one can translate the *Protrepticus*' general claims about contemplation into the *Nicomachean Ethics*' vocabulary. Contemplation in the *Protrepticus* walks and talks (or gazes?) like what the *Nicomachean Ethics* calls contemplation. Hence, one may presume reasonably – if defeasibly – that the *Protrepticus* is concerned with what the *Nicomachean Ethics* calls contemplation.

³⁵ See Hutchinson and Johnson (2014). About the *Protrepticus* material that Iamblichus preserves, Bywater (1869: 67) writes, “The thought and style of the Fragment remind one at every turn of the writer of the *Ethics*.” Reeve (2013: 19) finds the *Protrepticus*' account of the human good, at least *prima facie*, “remarkably similar” to the *EN*'s. T.W. Smith (2001: 7–10) and Natali (2007: 371) also highlight the *EN*'s protreptic aspects.

³⁶ Comparing the *Protrepticus* with Aristotle's other works, Diamond (2015: 12) sees a “remarkable consistency in Aristotle's overall biological/psychological philosophy.”

³⁷ Wareh (2012: 35–36) notes that, elsewhere in the *Protrepticus*, we see Aristotle “purposefully and boldly throwing Isocrates' language back at him.”

Lest one unreasonably expect even greater precision from the *Protrepticus* than from Aristotle's other works, notice that neither the *Nicomachean* nor the *Eudemian Ethics*, both of which share *EN* VI (= *EE* V) as a common book, always make these sharp distinctions themselves. Aristotle, for instance, makes no major cleavages between practical and contemplative rationality for the first five books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Instead, he simply distinguishes reason-responsive, nonrational desire from reason in the authoritative sense, i.e., from the thinking part that possesses intellectual virtues (e.g., at *EN* I.7, 1098a4–7 and I.13, 1103a1–6). Aristotle no doubt has good expository reasons to wait until Book VI to distinguish the two aspects of the rational “part” of the soul. Yet even *after* Book VI, Aristotle sometimes continues to refer simply to *nous*, without specifying whether such intellect is contemplative or practical (e.g., *EN* IX.4, 1166a16–23 and *EN* IX.8, 1168b34–1169a6). Moreover, as in the *Protrepticus*, so also in both the *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle occasionally refers to *phronêsis* when one might expect him to refer to *sophia*, and vice versa.³⁸ In other works, Aristotle uses *phronêsis* in a broad sense distinct from that which he introduces in Book VI.

The *Protrepticus* apparently avoids the *Nicomachean Ethics*' sharp distinctions between contemplative and practical *nous* and between *sophia* and *phronêsis*. The work shows strong signs, however, of making these distinctions implicitly. For example, *Protrepticus* 8, 46.22–47.4/B103 distinguishes between the *phronêsis* that we need to live (ζῆν) versus the kind that we need to live finely (ζῆν καλῶς). The former is narrowly concerned with the tasks of living; the latter, by contrast, “will know the truth.” As Düring observes, this passage invites comparison with the popularizing restatement of Book VI's distinction between practical and contemplative wisdom that appears in *MM* I.34, 1198b12–20.³⁹ It also matches *Metaphysics* α's distinction between practical knowledge (whose goal is practice) and contemplative knowledge (whose goal is truth) (993b19–24). Moreover, in the aristocratic defense

³⁸ Aristotle uses *sophia* and *phronêsis* interchangeably in *EE* I.1, 1214a31–b6; I.4, 1215a34–b5; I.5, 1216a19–20. See also *EE* II.1, 1220a6; a12. If we accept Kenny's (1978) claim that the *EE* is a mature work of Aristotle's (even if not necessarily posterior to the *EN*), we have additional grounds for admitting that even the mature Aristotle used *phronêsis* to signify something like contemplative wisdom. In the *EN*, see I.6, 1096b24; V.9, 1137a10. Aristotle's introduction to *sophia* in *Metaphysics* A.1–2 describes *sophia* as τοιαύτη φρόνησις (“such *phronêsis*”: 982b24). Needler (1928: 281) and Aubenque (1963: 7) also note the broad uses of *phronêsis* elsewhere (e.g., *Topics* VIII.14, 163b9; *Physics* VII.3, 247b11, 18; *DC* III.1, 298b23; *De Sensu* I, 437a1, 3; *GA* I.23, 731a35; III.2, 753a12; *Metaphysics* G.5, 1009b13; M.4, 1078b15).

³⁹ Düring (1961: 260).

of contemplation (*Protrepticus* 9, 52.16–28/B42), Aristotle distinguishes between contemplation and certain apparently practical kinds of knowledge.⁴⁰

Hence, none of these worries shows any radical discontinuity between the *Protrepticus* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Ultimately, I suspect, such worries resist appeal to the *Protrepticus* on the grounds that the work *does* argue for contemplation's practical utility. The objector apparently assumes that any argument for contemplation's utility would somehow *have to* conflict with Aristotle's *Nicomachean* distinction between contemplative and practical rationality, and so would *have to* count as a hangover from Aristotle's (alleged) "early Platonic phase." But I reject these assumptions. To be useful, contemplation need not perform the very tasks that Aristotle assigns to practical reasoning. Instead, Aristotle can accept a division of labor between these two modes of thought. He can hold that contemplation is useful, in whatever way it is, *just insofar as* the contemplator beholds unchanging objects.⁴¹

7.6 *Protrepticus* 10: The Utility Argument

Given *Protrepticus* 9's claims for contemplation's uselessness, *Protrepticus* 10's claims for contemplation's practical benefits are striking. Aristotle holds that although contemplation is not productive in any narrow sense, it offers a background perspective that guides the best practical reasoning. *Protrepticus* 10's utility argument is unfortunately not better known. Therefore, I translate the entirety of the chapter:

For just as doctors and [experts] about athletic training, so far as [they are] refined, all pretty much agree that it is necessary for those going to be good doctors and athletic trainers to be experienced about nature, so also it is necessary for good lawmakers to be experienced about nature, and much more, at any rate, than the former. For the [doctors and athletic trainers] are producers only of the virtue of the body, but the [lawmakers], being [concerned] about the virtues of the soul and claiming to teach

⁴⁰ I owe this reference to Nightingale (2004: 194n13). Reeve (2013: 19) appeals to *Protrepticus* 5, 35.5–14/B27 as evidence that the work distinguishes between *phronēsis* and *sophia*. Yet this section appears before *Protrepticus* 6–12, where less-controversially Aristotelian material appears. At *Protrepticus* 12, 59.26–28/B94, we learn that *eudaimonia* is "either judgment (*φρόνησις*) and a certain wisdom (*τινὰ σοφίαν*) or virtue or the greatest enjoyment [or] all these." If authentic, this passage shows that the Aristotle of the *Protrepticus* does explicitly distinguish between these two kinds of wisdom. Nevertheless, the location of this passage suggests that it is Iamblichus' bridge text.

⁴¹ As Gerson (2005: 66) rightly argues, Aristotle's eventually distinguishing practical from contemplative *nous* hardly commits Aristotle to jettisoning "a theoretical basis for practical reasoning."

about both [the] happiness and unhappiness of the city, are therefore much more in need of philosophy. [54.12–22]

For just as in the other arts, the best tools are discovered by the producers from nature (such as, in building, [the] plumb-line and ruler and compass [for drawing circles]), with some [tools] obtained [by reference to] water, some [by reference to] light and to the rays of the sun. By reference to these [tools], we discriminate what is, according to perception, sufficiently straight and smooth. [54.22–55.1]

In the same way also, it is necessary for the statesman to have certain boundary markers (τινὰς ὅρους) from nature itself and truth, with reference to which he discriminates what [is] just and what [is] fine and what [is] advantageous (πρὸς οὓς κρινεῖ τί δίκαιον καὶ τί καλόν καὶ τί συμφέρον). For just as [in building] these tools [sc. the ones obtained by reference to nature] surpass all, thus also [the] finest law [is] the one laid down most of all in accord with nature.⁴² But this is not possible for someone not having philosophized or having recognized the truth. [55.1–7]

And in the other arts, [people] do not come close to knowledge, obtaining both [their] tools and most exact reasonings from the first principles themselves; [rather, they obtain their tools] from [what is] second [hand] and third [hand] and distant, and they obtain [their] accounts from experience. But for the philosopher alone among the others is imitation from the exact things themselves; for he is a spectator (θεατής) of these [exact things], and not of imitations (μιμημάτων). [55.7–14]

So just as no one is a good housebuilder who does not use a ruler or any other such tool, but compares [his work] to other buildings, in the same way, too, perhaps, if someone either sets down laws for the city or performs actions by looking at and imitating with reference to other human actions or regimes, [whether] of Spartans or Cretans or some other such [people], [he is] neither a good lawgiver nor serious. For an imitation of [what is] not fine cannot be fine, nor [can an imitation of what is not] divine and stable in its nature [be] immortal and stable. But [it is] clear⁴³ that for the philosopher alone among producers are there both stable laws and correct and fine actions. For [the philosopher] alone lives looking toward nature and toward the divine (πρὸς τὴν φύσιν βλέπων ἢ καὶ πρὸς τὸ θεῖον), and, just like some good steersman fastening the first principles of [his] life to eternal and steadfast things, he goes forth and lives according to himself. [55.14–56.2]

⁴² In Walker (2010: 141), I accepted Düring's emendation of "law" (νόμος) to "boundary marker" (ὅρος) at 55.5; cf. the reference to ὁ ὅρος κάλλιστος at *EE* VIII.3, 1249b19. Keita Ishino has since persuaded me to reject Düring's emendation.

⁴³ Reading δῆλον at 55.24.

Contemplative indeed, then, is this knowledge (θεωρητικὴ ἥδε ἡ ἐπιστήμη), but it allows us to produce, in accord with it, everything. For just as sight is creative and productive of nothing, (for [the] only function of it is to discriminate and to make clear each visible thing), but it allows us to act (ἡμῖν δὲ παρέχει τὸ πράττειν) on account of itself and aids us the most in relation to actions (βοηθεῖ πρὸς τὰς πράξεις ἡμῖν τὰ μέγιστα) (for [we would be] almost entirely motionless [if] deprived of it), so [it is] clear that *with the knowledge being contemplative, we perform myriad [actions] in accord with it nevertheless, and we choose some things and flee others, and generally, we gain all good things on account of it.*⁴⁴ [56.2–12]

As in *Protrepticus* 9's aristocratic defense, Aristotle contrasts contemplative knowledge with practical, productive knowledge. Yet *Protrepticus* 10 stands out for arguing explicitly that contemplative knowledge is useful. Contemplation is not itself "creative and productive." It does not provide explicit decision procedures for action. Nevertheless, Aristotle holds, it can guide practical reasoning at a dispositional level. While "contemplative indeed," such thinking provides agents with insights *by reference to which* they can create well-wrought actions.

To spell out contemplation's role in usefully guiding practical reasoning, Aristotle begins (at *Protrepticus* 54.12–22) with medical and trainer analogies already familiar from *EN* I.13 and X.9. Once more, Aristotle holds that the best doctors and athletic trainers require a certain understanding of nature. At *Protrepticus* 54.22–55.7/B47, however, Aristotle introduces a new analogy involving the art of building. He observes that in arts such as building, the best tools (plumb-lines, rulers, and compasses) are discovered "from nature" and help us to judge exactitude. Good builders use these tools to ensure that their measurements are exact – and thus to produce well-measured buildings. Bad builders, by contrast, rely merely on other buildings to make their measurements. True, seasoned craftsmen can often "eyeball" proper measurements on the basis of experience, and such inexact measurement may have its place outside the practice of art. Still, even good artisans use plumb-lines, rulers, and compasses for exact measurement. Moreover, they do so as part of their art, and not as an alien, "rationalist" imposition on it.⁴⁵ Bad artisans, on the other hand, rely on unreliable measures. Their works tend to be disproportionate and rickety as a result.

⁴⁴ Like Hutchinson and Johnson (2005: 264) and Bobonich (2007: 164), I take the italicized lines possibly to be Iamblichus' bridge text. Nevertheless, context suggests Aristotle was drawing a parallel between sight and contemplation in his original text.

⁴⁵ I use "rationalist" in Oakeshott's ([1962] 1991) sense.

Aristotle here seems to rely on a view from Plato's *Philebus*, viz., that an activity is reliable to the extent that exact measure guides it.⁴⁶ According to Socrates, flute players determine their harmonies by hit and miss; hence, "there is a lot of imprecision mixed up in [flute playing] and very little reliability" (56a).⁴⁷ Building, however, "owes its superior level of craftsmanship over other disciplines to its frequent use of measures and instruments" (56b). Among these tools, Socrates mentions the plumb-line, ruler, and compass – the same instruments that the *Protrepticus* lists.

Protrepticus 55.14–23/B49 likens bad agents to bad artisans. Just as the latter rely on inexact measures, the former guide their practical reasoning by inexact measures of *the human good*. As situated agents and legislators, they imitate "other human actions or regimes" *qua* actions or regimes (55.19). Such measures, however, are no better for agents seeking to perform excellent actions than other buildings are for builders seeking to create excellent structures. Agents who act in accord with them fail to produce truly excellent – "immortal and stable" (55.23) – actions.

Notice that, in *EN* X.9, Aristotle makes similar points about the insufficiency of a legislator's simply surveying the laws of other regimes. Such is the misguided approach, Aristotle says, promoted by certain sophists (1181a12–17). Here, Aristotle probably has in mind Isocrates, who recommends that aspiring legislators simply survey the already existing good laws of various regimes, which Isocrates identifies as an easy task not requiring theoretical understanding (*Antidosis* 81–84). But such figures, Aristotle contends, mistakenly overlook the deeper comprehension that one must employ to select the right laws in the first place (1181a17–19). More importantly, *EN* X.9 (re-)introduces a medical analogy: medical experts not only survey various well-reputed treatments; they also grasp deeper causes, such as the bodily states of various patients, that explain why such treatments are beneficial for those patients (1181b3–5). Hence, Aristotle suggests that, while considering the well-reputed laws of other regimes is worthwhile for one learning political science, one must also understand, more deeply, why such laws are beneficial (1181b6–9).⁴⁸

A point of clarification: *Protrepticus* 10 begins by saying that *lawmakers* and *statesmen* will need philosophy. Yet *Protrepticus* 10, 55.12–14 and 55.24–25 explicitly hold that *philosophers* derive these boundary markers of the human good and produce the best actions and laws. Consistent with the evident influence of Plato's *Republic* on this section of the *Protrepticus*,

⁴⁶ As Düring (1961: 215) notes. ⁴⁷ Translations are by D. Frede, in Cooper (1997).

⁴⁸ See Hutchinson and Johnson (2014: 407–408).

Aristotle evidently suggests that philosopher-lawmakers, at least of some variety, are a possibility, and that the best lawmakers will be philosophers of a sort.⁴⁹

Contemplation, then, provides cognitive access to *exact* measures of the human good. By “looking toward nature and toward the divine” (πρὸς τὴν φύσιν βλέπων ζῆ καὶ πρὸς τὸ θεῖον: 55.26–27/B50), contemplators can derive “certain boundary markers (τινὰς ὁρούς) from nature itself and truth” (55.1) for practical reasoning. Again, the word that I translate as “boundary markers” is the plural of the Greek word *horos*. This word originally signified the stone boundary marker that demarcated the borders of some region of land (e.g., plowland, the agora, a sanctuary site).⁵⁰ Gradually, the word *horos* came to mean “norm,” “standard,” “benchmark,” or “delimitation,” and – as we have seen – it began to show up in medical contexts. Yet throughout its history, *horos* retains rich resonances of delimiting borders.⁵¹ So, in saying that we can derive *horoi* for practical reasoning through contemplation, Aristotle is saying that through exercising contemplation, we can obtain *norms*, *standards*, or *benchmarks* for good practical judgment, a sense of that which *marks the boundaries* of such judgment, of that which *delimits* it. Moreover, like the rough-hewn stones that served as geographical boundary markers⁵², and like the standards of health that the best doctors use, we obtain these boundary markers from nature. (I consider what these *horoi* are in Chapter 8. For now, I consider only the *Protrepticus*’ remarks on how contemplation is useful in helping us to discern them. Suffice it to say, I see no evidence for Jaeger’s proposal that Aristotle thinks that contemplators derive such boundary-markers from Platonic Forms.⁵³)

⁴⁹ Unlike Collins (2015: 258, 262–263), I do not see that the *Protrepticus* divides the labor between philosophers and rulers.

⁵⁰ For this use of *horos*, see *Constitution of Athens* XII.4 (on Solon’s removal of *horoi*). On *horoi*, see Lalonde (1991) and Ober (1995).

⁵¹ As Ober (1995: 93n4) writes: “The Greek term for ‘watcher-over’ or ‘guardian’ is οὔρος, formally identical to the Ionian form (used by Homer) for ὄρος and often used in compounds related to the protection of liminal zones, e.g., πυλωρός (gate-keeper), θυρωρός (door-keeper), φρουρός (guard); even if, as is generally supposed, the terms (ὄρος, οὔρος) do not share a common root, the concepts (border/frontier, watcher/guard) are intimately related in Greek practice and thought.”

⁵² Again, see Ober (1995: 97), commenting on the *horos* stone that Athena uses to strike Ares in Homer, *Iliad* 21.403–405.

⁵³ Jaeger (1962: 90–93). Against Jaeger, see Von Fritz and Kapp (1950: 34), Düring (1961: 213–214), Monan (1968: 1–12), and M. Johnson (2015: 180–182). M. Johnson (2015: 183–185) argues, instead, that the instruments *Protrepticus* 10’s contemplator derives from nature include such general principles as those Aristotle mentions at *Politics* I.2, 1252a24–34, e.g., that parts of a natural pair must combine. These principles, Johnson contends, are necessary for producing good laws. I concur that, according to Aristotle, contemplators might or could derive such principles from nature. Yet *Protrepticus* 10 specifies certain kinds of principles, viz., *horoi*, that contemplators derive from nature. Hence, my reading aims to accord with this feature of *Protrepticus* 10’s text.

At 55.1, Aristotle says that contemplation enables practical agents to obtain *horoi* (in the plural), which guide these agents in practical reasoning and action. By contrast, both the *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian* passages that I considered earlier claimed that *phronimoi* grasp the *horos* (in the singular) that defines correct reason. Although the *Protrepticus* speaks in the plural, and the other ethical works speak in the singular, they need not conflict. Consider a sizable plot of land. To demarcate this plot, we might use multiple boundary markers. But these plural boundary markers all signal the same boundary and demarcate the same plot. Thus, the combination of these individual boundary markers functions as a unified boundary marker. Similarly, instead of using the singular *horos*, the *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics* could just as well follow the *Protrepticus* and speak of *horoi* in the plural, i.e., of what conditions delimit the ethical mean from ethical excess, on the one hand, and of what conditions delimit that mean from ethical deficiency, on the other. And vice versa.

The norm of good judgment that sets the boundaries for, or delimits, virtuous practical reasoning, I take it, is the human good. Through exercising contemplation, Aristotle suggests, agents grasp the nature of the human good. By judging and acting by reference to this understanding, one derived from sources more stable than mere fluctuating convention, contemplators most exactly and reliably achieve the intermediate in passion and action. On this basis, Aristotle identifies *the philosopher* as the most exact and reliable practical reasoner. In a passage that recalls *Republic* X.599a–e, Aristotle maintains that only philosophers take their lead not from imitations, but “from the exact things themselves” (55.12–14). Unlike other practical knowers, philosophers “take their instruments and their most exact reasonings from first principles” (55.7–10). Accordingly, the law instituted by philosophical legislators is “most of all in accord with nature” (ὁ μάλιστα κατὰ φύσιν: 55.5/B47). The philosopher, then, is the true *phronimos*. Ultimately, for the philosopher “alone among producers (δημιουργῶν) are there both stable laws and correct and fine actions” (55.24–25/B49). Philosophers need not be productive when contemplating. The insights they obtain through contemplation, however, guide their crafting fine laws and actions in their practical, noncontemplative moments. Thus, contemplation is actively guiding and useful after all.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ For the thoughts that the best regime accords with the best boundary markers, is preserved by rulers with expert understanding, and is not simply an imitation of other existing regimes, see Plato, *Statesman* 293d–e; 297b–c. For similar comparisons between ruling expertise (on the one hand) and medicine and steersmanship (on the other), see *Statesman* 293a–c; 296d–297b.

7.7 Is Aristotle's Protreptic Strategy Consistent?

Protrepticus 9 denies that contemplation's uselessness implies its worthlessness. On the contrary, such uselessness is consistent with contemplation's status as the ultimate end within a life. *Protrepticus* 10, however, argues that contemplation is nevertheless useful after all.

Are these views mutually consistent? If Aristotle presses the utility argument, does Aristotle undercut his aristocratic defense of contemplation? While Aristotle could offer either argument on its own to exhort his audience, the two arguments together might seem to cancel each other out. On this basis, Andrea Wilson Nightingale charges the *Protrepticus*' overall defense of contemplation with incoherence.⁵⁵ In response, I argue that Aristotle's two arguments are mutually consistent. If the utility argument does not explicitly appear in Aristotle's other works, this is not because logic compelled Aristotle to abandon it.⁵⁶

To elaborate: when Aristotle offers the aristocratic defense against the charge that contemplation is useless, he responds to the worry that contemplation is worthless because it does not *subserve a higher end*. Notice Aristotle's language. At 52.26–27/B42, Aristotle denies that we should always expect some “other benefit beside the thing itself” (ὠφέλειαν ἑτέραν παρ’ αὐτὸ τὸ πρᾶγμα). Likewise, 53.17–18/B44 proposes that contemplation “should be chosen not on account of something else, but on account of itself” (οὐδὲ δι’ ἕτερον ἀλλὰ δι’ ἑαυτὴν αἰρεῖσθαι αὐτὴν προσήκει). And 53.20–21/B44 insists that contemplation is choiceworthy “even if nothing more were to follow from it” (καὶ εἰ μὴδὲν μέλλοι πλεῖον ἅπ’ αὐτῆς ἔσσεσθαι). Nor is such language unique to the *Protrepticus*. *EN*

Bobonich (2007: 167) sees “a significant apparent difference” between Aristotle's conception of contemplation in the *Protrepticus* and in the *EN* and *EE*. He says that “it is at least plausible to think that in the *Protrepticus*, the knowledge that the philosopher uses in moving to judgments, e.g., about laws, is the highest kind of knowledge there is.” Here, one must be careful. The *Protrepticus* holds that (some of) the knowledge the philosopher uses in his political judgment *is* the highest sort of wisdom. Nevertheless, the *Protrepticus* need not identify this highest knowledge with *practical* wisdom. Instead, Aristotle can allow that contemplative wisdom *is* the highest wisdom, even in the *Protrepticus*. Such wisdom, however, can be useful for *guiding* practically wise judgment.

⁵⁵ Nightingale (2004: 196–197).

⁵⁶ Gadamer (1928: 145–146) argues that one should not expect rigid doctrinal consistency in a philosophical protreptic, since such a work is intended to turn the reader toward philosophy as such, not toward any particular philosophical view. Yet given the internal aims of philosophical protreptic, it would be troublesome if two major arguments clashed in a straightforward fashion. Such a fundamental inconsistency would cancel out whatever particular reasons one would have for pursuing philosophical activity. So, although presenting a maximally consistent set of views need not be the ultimate aim of a philosophical protreptic, a consistency of basic argument would nevertheless be important for instrumentally promoting protreptic goals. Again, see *EN* X.1, 1172b3–7 on the protreptic value of true arguments.

X.7, 1177b20, for instance, says that contemplation appears “to aim at no end beside itself” (παρ’ αὐτήν). Similarly, *Metaphysics* A.2, 982b24–28, holds that we seek to exercise *sophia* “on account of no other advantage” (δι’ οὐδεμίαν αὐτήν . . . χρεῖαν ἑτέραν) for unlike a servant, contemplation “exists for itself” (αὐτῆς ἑνεκέν).

According to Aristotle, then, contemplation is useless for *subservient* higher functions, functions “other” than or “beside” contemplation, or functions that “follow from” contemplation. For Aristotle, however, *subservience* to higher functions is not the only way for functions to be useful. Instead, they can also be useful by facilitating and *guiding* the lower functions upon which their very exercise depends. When one distinguishes subserving from guiding (per [Section 4.3](#)), the utility argument’s consistency with the aristocratic defense becomes evident. For Aristotle, perceptive activity is the highest function in the lives of nonhuman animals. Such organisms can engage in no higher functions. And so, unlike nutrition, perception is “useless” for any higher sort of nonrational animal activity. Indeed, the sensory pleasure that animals enjoy offers something of an analogue to the contemplation that human beings enjoy.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, perceptive activity is still useful for animals – not for subserving their threptic activity, but for guiding it.

Likewise, Aristotle can say, contemplation is “useless” for human beings insofar as it subserves no higher human functions. Nutrition and perception both subserve practical reasoning, which in turn subserves contemplation. Contemplation, however, is “useless” in the richer sense that there simply are no higher functions that contemplation subserves. Contemplation is the highest – and most authoritative – of all powers of soul without qualification.

If contemplation can be useful for human beings, not by *subservient* higher functions, but by *guiding* lower ones that subserve it, then Aristotle can offer the utility argument for pursuing contemplation while still insisting that contemplation is a useless activity. Aristotle can deny that we should expect some “other benefit beside” contemplation itself, and he can hold that contemplation is choiceworthy “even if nothing more were to follow from it.” At the same time, he can identify contemplation as useful for guiding lower life-functions. Contemplation, he can say, guides the subordinate power of practical reasoning, which in turn guides virtuous patterns of nonrational desire (as discussed in [Chapter 6](#)). In guiding lower

⁵⁷ Analogues hold perhaps even for plants. A plant’s full blossoming forth, *qua* the ultimate end of plant life, serves no higher end within the plant’s life. To this extent, such blossoming forth also displays a certain uselessness. I owe this suggestion to Monte Ransome Johnson.

life-functions, however, contemplation ultimately sustains and extends contemplation. In this way, contemplation retains its ultimacy as an end within a human life. Indeed, Aristotle's explicit comparison between contemplation and sight in *Protrepticus* 56.4–12/B51 implicitly recalls the ways in which perception *can* guide lower life-functions. Aristotle, then, can grant that contemplation guides lower life-functions. Nevertheless, he can insist that contemplation possesses freedom and leisure. Contemplation is free and leisured because it is not necessary or useful for any higher ends. No higher activities, after all, co-opt contemplation for their ends. Instead, contemplation co-opts all lower activities for *its* ends. Hence, the *Protrepticus*' utility argument coheres with the aristocratic defense, and vice versa.

The Third Wave

From Contemplating the Divine to Understanding the Human Good

8.1 Obstacles for Deriving Boundary Markers of the Human Good

Protrepticus 10 offers a robust account of contemplation's utility. Contemplation enables contemplators to derive *horoi*, or boundary markers, of the human good. Contemplation thus seems capable of authoritative guidingness in the human soul: it enables one to serve as a good steersman (κυβερνήτης) on the ship of life (*Protrepticus* 10, 55.26–56.2/B50; cf. Plato, *Republic* VI.488a–489a). At the same time, the *Protrepticus*' utility argument, properly understood, coheres with Aristotle's remarks on contemplation's uselessness. *Protrepticus* 10's neglected argument, then, offers a key resource for addressing the utility question. Yet exactly how is contemplation useful for enabling contemplators to derive such boundary markers?

Here is one proposal. As I have argued, *EN* I.13 holds that the *phronimos* requires a theoretical understanding of the human soul. On this view, just as the doctor understands the whole body, the *phronimos* should understand our whole system of life-functions. As it turns out, *Protrepticus* 10 also accepts this doctor analogy (54.12–22/B46). Thus, when Aristotle says that philosophers acquire boundary markers from “nature itself and truth” and from “first principles,” perhaps Aristotle thinks that philosophers obtain those standards from a direct contemplative understanding of the well-functioning human soul.¹

¹ While making no reference to the *Protrepticus*, T. Sherman (2002: 483–484) suggests that Aristotelian contemplation can provide practical guidance by (directly) contemplating the human soul and its excellent functioning. Although she says that contemplation “does not increase practical wisdom by a jot” – because contemplation does not issue forth decision-procedures – Rorty (1980: 385) thinks that the contemplator benefits in a way from contemplating “the *eidos* Humanity.” Owens (1987: 9) maintains that theoretical knowledge of the human soul is useful for practical wisdom, though it is unclear whether he thinks this knowledge is identical with the contemplative wisdom Aristotle praises in *EN* X.7–8. Leunissen (2015) argues that the *phronimos* will at least possess substantial natural-scientific understanding of human nature.

Aristotle can conclude that contemplation is useful if he allows the human soul and its good functioning to be fitting objects of contemplation. And indeed, Aristotle does make this allowance – at least at moments. *DA* I.1, for instance, insists that the study of soul, which presumably includes the study of the human soul, contains two features shared by the highest kinds of knowledge: (1) it possesses exactness and (2) it has “better and more wonderful” (βελτιόνων τε καὶ θαυμασιωτέρων) objects than other sciences. On this basis, the study of soul belongs among the primary studies (ἐν πρώτοις: *DA* I.1, 402a1–4). Accordingly, the study of soul (as part of the science of nature) is part of one of the three major “contemplative philosophies” (φιλοσοφίαι θεωρητικαί), along with theology and mathematics (*Metaphysics* E.1, 1026a18–19). Further, Aristotle affirms that the study of soul is beneficial with a view to the whole truth (πρὸς ἀλήθειαν ἄπασαν: *DA* I.1, 402a4). Aristotle emphasizes psychology’s contribution to truth in natural science (402a3–4). Yet the study of soul promises to conduce to truth in ethics and politics as well.²

Taking this point to heart, Aristotle’s leading ancient commentator, Alexander of Aphrodisias, praises the study of psychology in the introduction to his own *De Anima*. Such study, he notes, conforms with the Delphic command to “Know thyself.” According to Alexander, it provides contemplators with a certain useful kind of self-knowledge, an action-guiding understanding of one’s essential nature as a living body subject to generation and corruption. Thus, Alexander affirms that “any person who intends to obey the god and live the life in accordance with his nature must first analyse the soul and know just what it is.”³ Grasping the nature of our soul, and its mortality, is necessary for living well.⁴

The thought that contemplators can derive boundary markers of the human good by understanding human nature and the human soul goes some way toward clarifying contemplation’s usefulness. Yet this response faces an obstacle. If Aristotle is to respond fully to the utility problem, the best and most complete exercise of contemplative *nous* should be useful. Contemplation according to *sophia*, and not just other intellectual virtues, should be authoritatively guiding and beneficial. Yet recall Aristotle’s

² Cf. Hicks (1907: 176); Polansky (2007: 36); Shields (2016: 82).

³ Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On the Soul*, 1.1–2.5 (trans. Caston). Cf. Polansky (2007: 1–6) on Aristotle’s *De Anima* as a source of self-knowledge. According to Themistius, *On Aristotle on the Soul* (1.24–2.5), “So if [the soul] knows itself, it is credible on other [matters] too; but if misled about itself, on what else could it be considered credible?” (trans. Todd). Themistius could intend, and view as practically beneficial, the sort of self-knowledge (of one’s soul) that Alexander mentions. Yet the text is unclear.

⁴ See Caston (2012: 73).

restrictions on the best sort of contemplation. Aristotle pointedly denies human nature and the human soul to be contemplation's paradigmatic objects. As discussed in [Section 2.4](#), the *Protrepticus* is clear enough about contemplation's divine objects, and the *Nicomachean Ethics* offers the same clarity. Since *sophia* is the highest sort of wisdom, *sophia* must have for its objects the highest kinds of being in the cosmos. Since humanity "is not the best of the things in the cosmos" (*EN* VI.7, 1141a20–22), however, *sophia*'s objects must be "far more divine in nature" than human beings (1141b1–2; cf. *EN* VIII.7, 1158b36). Indeed, *sophia* "is [contemplative] of nothing coming into being" (*EN* VI.12, 1143b19–20).

Like a beautifully organized animal body of the sort the biologist studies, humanity is a sublunary, relatively accessible object of contemplation (cf. *PA* I.5, 644b22–645a4). Therefore, contemplating humanity – including the structure and organization of a well-ordered human soul – should offer the contemplator compensating benefits of cognitive accessibility. As an object of contemplation, however, the fine order of a harmonious human soul – an object of the science of nature (*PA* I.1, 641a17–b10) – would ultimately pale in comparison with the eternally self-thinking Prime Mover.⁵ Thus, Alexander of Aphrodisias reportedly believed *DA* I.1's opening lines to be spurious. Given Aristotle's strictures elsewhere, Alexander contends, Aristotle could not have held the (human) soul to count among the best and most wonderful things.⁶

If Alexander did hold this view, his assessment is too extreme. When *DA* I.1 claims that psychology studies "better and more wonderful" things than other sciences do, perhaps Aristotle construes the referent relatively widely. Perhaps he thinks the study of soul, as a branch of natural science, has relatively more dignified proper objects than, say, the practical sciences. According to *Metaphysics* E.1, theology, mathematics, or natural science deal *more* with the divine than other sciences do; hence, the former sciences are more choiceworthy (1026a19–23). Therefore, one can reconcile the *De Anima*'s opening remarks with Aristotle's claims elsewhere that the unqualifiedly best and most wonderful things are superhuman. Nevertheless, Aristotle *does* deny that humanity is contemplation's highest object. And even while granting the relative superiority of theology, mathematics, and natural science over other sciences, *Metaphysics* E.1 insists that theology is higher than the other contemplative sciences (1026a23) – including, presumably, those that study human beings.

⁵ Cf. Mara (1987: 382–383) against Rorty (1980). ⁶ See Hicks (1907: 173).

Aristotle grants, then, that philosophers (at moments) contemplate the human soul directly. Since this point will be important later, let me be clear: we can, on Aristotle's view, grasp what a human being is by contemplating human nature directly. Yet Aristotle must still explain how contemplation in its "most honorable," or theological form – as the contemplation of god – could authoritatively guide lower human life-functions. Aristotle would need to accomplish this task especially if he claims, as he does in *EN* X. 7–8, that a *highly rarefied* form of contemplation, the exercise of *sophia*, constitutes our complete happiness.

Contemplation's utility becomes more perplexing because *Protrepticus* 10 actually insists that contemplation derives its usefulness from its focus on the divine: "For [the philosopher] alone lives looking toward nature and toward the divine (πρὸς τὴν φύσιν βλέπων ζῆ καὶ πρὸς τὸ θεῖον), and, just like some good steersman fastening the first principles of [his] life to eternal and steadfast things, he goes forth and lives according to himself" (55.26–56.2/B50). So, contemplators benefit not just from looking *toward nature* (including, perhaps, human nature), but from looking *toward the divine*.⁷ While the "divine" objects of contemplation in the *Protrepticus* include celestial phenomena, the *Protrepticus*, as already argued, holds that contemplators will – especially and paradigmatically – study divine thinking as a source of cosmic order. Therefore, *Protrepticus* 10's remarks on "the divine" presumably refer to some such divine thinking. In *Protrepticus* 10, 55.26–56.2/B50, then, Aristotle suggests that contemplating the universe as ordered by such divine thinking *does* guide agents in their navigating the swirling, choppy waters of practice. Still, he leaves us wondering exactly *how*.⁸

8.2 The *Protrepticus* on Deriving Boundary Markers of the Human Good

So, how can contemplating the divine possibly be useful in the way that the *Protrepticus* proposes? Aristotle faces an apparent dilemma because the right sort of object from which to derive boundary markers for excess and deficiency in practical reasoning, viz., the human soul, is the wrong sort of object for the best sort of contemplation.

⁷ Given the repetition of πρὸς, I see no reason to accept Düring's proposal (1961: 222) that the καὶ in 55.26–27 is expegetical.

⁸ Düring (1961: 205) finds the link that Aristotle draws between contemplative insight and practical reasoning in these passages "far from logically clear." Cf. Hutchinson and Johnson (2005: 265).

Aristotle has a problem if he believes that contemplatively deriving boundary markers of the human good requires one to behold the human essence or soul as the most perfect sort of contemplation's *proximate or direct object*. Aristotle's problem dissolves, however, if the most perfect sort of contemplation *indirectly* elucidates the human good's structure and boundaries. In this case, the most perfect sort of contemplation would still possess divine objects. Yet contemplation of divine objects would still provide special cognitive access to boundary markers of the human good. Aristotle, I argue, accounts for the utility of (the best sort of) contemplation in just this way. To show how, I examine *Protrepticus* 8 (47.5–48.21/B104–110), which provides the core of the *Protrepticus*' response to this problem.⁹

Suppose, Aristotle says that human beings were suitably aware of themselves. Suppose that, like Lynceus, who could see through walls and trees, human beings could perceive themselves. If so, they would recognize “from what sorts of bad things they are composed” (ἐξ οἷων συνέστηκε κακῶν: 47.15/B105). For, in some sense, the finite, mortal human being is “nothing” (47.8–10/B104). The human being's compositional matter, for instance, is no different from that of other perishable organisms.¹⁰ Similarly, all the goods that appear “great” to human beings – goods of the body such as strength, stature, and beauty (47.10/B104), as well as external goods such as honor and reputation (47.16) – are also, in some sense, worthless (cf. Plato, *Republic* VI.486a).

Here, Aristotle's point – expressed in a somewhat exaggerated, rhetorically charged way – is that human beings and human goods show up as relatively incomplete when compared against the standard of divinity.¹¹ For Aristotle allows that we *can* obtain a certain awareness about ourselves,

⁹ According to Hutchinson and Johnson (unpublished work A), this part of *Protrepticus* 8 expresses a characteristically Pythagorean voice. Aristotle, however, need not disagree with this voice. On the contrary, sections of the *Protrepticus* featuring a characteristically Aristotelian voice accept other claims from *Protrepticus* 8's Pythagorean voice. Consider the Pythagorean voice on the ways that lower-level cognitive activities approximate higher-level ones (*Protrepticus* 8, 45.18–46.18/B99–102). Aristotle accepts these points about approximation: *Protrepticus* 7, 44.9–26/B74–77; 9, 53.15–54.5/B44; 11, 59.3–13/B90–91.

¹⁰ In *PA* I.5, 645a26–30 – part of another protreptic – Aristotle considers those who disdain the study of animals out of disgust. He accuses such people of a certain self-ignorance about their own embodiment and animality: “If someone has considered the study of the other animals to lack value, he ought to think the same thing about himself as well; for it is impossible to look at that from which mankind has been constituted – blood, flesh, bones, blood vessels, and other such parts – without considerable disgust” (trans. Lennox).

¹¹ Case ([1910] 1996: 5) notes the apparent difference between Aristotle's estimation of external goods in this passage and his willingness, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, to accord external goods some kind of special value in relation to happiness. On this basis, Case assigns the *Protrepticus* to an early Platonic

i.e., about our mortality and our relative weakness and shortness of life (47.19–20/B105). We can obtain this awareness by “beholding eternal things” (καθορῶντι τῶν αἰδιῶν: 47.17–18/B105), i.e., by contemplating what is immortal and divine. In other words, contemplating the divine clarifies the *upper limits* of the human good. In bringing to light our difference and separation from the divine, contemplation elucidates how we, as all-too-mortal human beings, are akin to other animal life-forms. Gazing upon the divine, we recognize that human life is comparatively “miserable by nature and difficult” (ἄθλιος φύσει καὶ χαλεπός: 48.14/B109). We recognize our basic dependence upon both our satisfying our threptic needs and our acquiring external goods that promise some measure of threptic security.

In *Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius independently attests to the Aristotelian status of the Lynceus passage. He also reads Aristotle in roughly the way I suggest. In *Consolation* III.8, Lady Philosophy exhorts Boethius to turn to contemplation: “Contemplate the vastness, the mightiness, the swiftness of the heavens and now, at last, stop admiring worthless things” (III.8.8). By reference to the standards that contemplation provides us, Lady Philosophy suggests, we will recognize the relative poverty and fleetingness of bodily beauty (III.8.9). Assume – “as Aristotle says” – that we had eyesight sharp as Lynceus’. In such a case, we would find even the apparently beautiful Alcibiades disgusting (III.8.10). When we overvalue bodily beauty and other goods of fortune, we show a certain lack of self-knowledge about our mortal limitations. Thus, Lady Philosophy’s hortatory conclusion: “Go ahead, mortals, reckon the goods of the body as highly as you like, so long as you realize that this little something that you admire can be done away with by the paltry flame of a three-day fever” (III.8.11, trans. Relihan).

A sharp grasp of human finitude and mortality, however, is not the only insight that contemplation provides. For Aristotle suggests that by “beholding eternal things,” we would also discover the *lower limits* of the human good. In contemplating god, the divine thinking that orders the cosmos, one would contemplate intellectual activity in an eternal, paradigmatic form. Therefore, Aristotle’s philosophers would also be contemplating the activity for which they too have the power, albeit in

phrase of Aristotle’s career. Yet we need not read the *Protrepticus* this way. True, such goods, according to the *Protrepticus*, are not necessarily complete without qualification; but Aristotle still recognizes them as beneficial and choiceworthy in their way, viz., as instrumental (9, 52.20–53.15/B42–43; see [Section 2.5](#) for discussion). Such a position coheres with Aristotle’s *Nicomachean* views on external goods, and his denial there that they are complete without qualification.

a limited, imperfect way. Among all our human possessions, Aristotle insists, only our intellect seems immortal and divine (48.9–13/B108); indeed, *nous* “is the god in us” (48.16–17/B110). As I argued in [Chapter 5](#), such remarks do not show that Aristotle identifies *nous* as a literally superhuman, separable component of the human soul. Instead, they simply highlight Aristotle’s view that *nous* is a power of a general sort that human beings, unlike other mortal creatures, share with god. Hence, in contemplating the divine, Aristotle’s philosophers would be in a position to recognize not only their finitude in relation to the divine, but also their *relative kinship* with the divine. On this basis, Aristotle suggests, contemplators will recognize that “in comparison with everything else, the human being seems to be a god” (πρὸς τὰ ἄλλα θεὸν εἶναι τὸν ἄνθρωπον: 48.15–16/B109).

These points indicate, even within the *Protrepticus*, how contemplation of the divine can be useful for deriving boundary markers of the human good. On my proposal, Aristotle accepts the view, pervasive in Greek thinking, that human nature and the human good lie between the bestial and the divine.¹² In contemplating the divine, contemplators thereby grasp their intermediate place in the cosmos between beasts and gods. In doing so, contemplators come to understand how their good as human beings is demarcated and delimited from the good of other kinds of living beings. Consequently, contemplation of the divine would be useful for deriving boundary markers of the human good – the target we seek – in a quite literal sense. Such contemplation would elucidate what demarcates the ethical mean between excess and deficiency. For Aristotle, the ethical mean need not be a simple intermediacy between divine and bestial behaviors. Yet understanding one’s intermediate place between the divine and the bestial would still be pertinent to grasping the ethical mean. For the noetic activity that we share with gods possesses a role in human life that it lacks in the lives of beasts, i.e., perishable life-forms whose activity is governed by perception and nonrational desire. Likewise, *epithumia* and *thumos* (which we share with beasts, though in a distinctively human form) possess a role in human life that they lack in the lives of gods – i.e., disembodied forms of life whose activity is not dependent on the fulfillment of threptic needs and the satisfaction of nonrational desires.

Contemplators, then, recognize that they are higher – more powerful, more active – than nonhuman animals to the extent they can contemplate. Through contemplating the divine, contemplators understand that their

¹² See, e.g., Vernant (1996: ch. 7), Detienne (1982), Nussbaum (1995: 95–98), and Lloyd (2012: ch. 1).

powers extend beyond those functions that they share with such animals. Consequently, *qua* practically wise, contemplators will grant due weight to their contemplative powers and maintain their nonrational desires under appropriate control. In this way, they avoid vice in one direction. At the same time, through contemplating the divine, they recognize that they are lower than the immortals. For human contemplation requires human beings to fulfill their basic threptic needs as perishable living organisms. Hence, contemplators *qua* practically wise will simultaneously grant their nonrational desires due weight and so avoid vice in another direction. Benefiting from the utility of contemplation, Aristotle can argue, such agents will be in a position most reliably to achieve the intermediate in action and passion and to create good laws.

The *Protrepticus*' view is broadly continuous with Aristotle's other remarks on the place of humanity (and its good) in relation to other living beings (and their respective good). In getting clear that we are neither beasts nor gods (*Politics* I.2, 1253a3–4; a29), Aristotle thinks, we would realize most perspicuously that the kind of activity proper to us is neither superhuman nor subhuman (*EN* VII.1, 1145a23–27). We would recognize that while there might be a kind of life and *eudaimonia* superior to human life and *eudaimonia* – viz., god's – human beings find their good in a way of life that is itself superior to that of horses, birds, and fish (*EE* I.7, 1217a20–29). For only the human being “partakes of the divine among the animals known to us, or [the human being] most of all” (*PA* II.10, 656a7–8) – where partaking of the divine is construable narrowly as performing activities of the sort that gods also perform. Thus, aside from its other intrinsic pleasures, contemplation would disclose most fully how the human essence and good is delimited, bounded, or defined by the good of beings above us and below us.¹³

A striking passage from *Protrepticus* 5, 35.14–18/B28 suggests the god-likeness of intellect and the intermediate status of the human between gods and lower life forms: “Deprived, then, of perception and intellect, a human being becomes like a plant; and deprived of intellect alone, he is turned into a beast; but deprived of irrationality and abiding by intellect,

¹³ Aristotle's views on the place of the human good between the divine and the bestial are discussed in different ways by Kullman (1991: 107); Nussbaum (1995: 90–95; 102–110); Achtenberg (1995: 29–36); Long (1999: 121–124). See also the epitome of Peripatetic ethics attributed to Arius Didymus, in Simpson (2014: 87 [118.5–10 Wachsmuth]). Following Vernant (1996: 176), Lloyd (2012: 12–14) argues that Aristotle accepts the Orphic/Pythagorean thought that we should approximate divinity by leaving behind one's human nature. My own view is closer to that of Aubenque (1963: 81–84), who emphasizes humanity's separateness from the divine. See Section 4.5.

he becomes like god.” This passage might seem to suggest, however, that human beings should transcend humanity directly by eliminating and overcoming their animal nature. In [Sections 4.5](#) and [5.6](#), I denied that Aristotle holds such a view. Hence, I read this passage as saying only that we cannot fully approximate the divine when we live by nonrational desire and accept its authority. Instead, to approximate the divine fully, we should abide by (i.e., live by) contemplative *nous* and the insights it provides. Only then will we be in the best position to maintain ourselves and activate our powers; only then can we approximate the divine as far as possible as human beings.¹⁴

The *Protrepticus*’ implicit answer to the question of exactly how contemplation can provide boundary markers for legislators offers additional insight into Aristotle’s claim that “the contemplation of god” can serve as “the finest boundary marker” (ὁ ὅρος κάλλιστος; 1249b19) for statesmen seeking to determine the proper amount of natural goods for their citizens (*EE* VIII.3, 1249b16–23). As a boundary marker for the possession of natural goods (e.g., bodily goods, wealth, friends), “the contemplation of god” establishes an upper limit on the possession of such goods. It rules out excess (1249b20), for our possession of natural goods should not “hinder” us (1249b20) in exercising contemplation. Attaining and using such goods should not focus our attention on our lower functions, shared with other mortal life-forms, at the expense of regular, ongoing contemplation, which we share with god. At the same time, “the contemplation of god” establishes a lower limit on the possession of such goods. It rules out deficiency in possession – literally, “need” (ἐνδεῖαν; 1249b19). For given the requirements of our lower mortal nature, including our threptic needs, a lack of natural goods also hinders our contemplation. By choosing according to such a boundary marker (or boundary markers), we approximate god’s eternal activity as fully as we can as human beings: that is, we exercise, maintain, and extend our powers as contemplative animals as far as possible. Recall that nutrition and reproduction are for the sake of an organism’s partaking in eternal activity, not as a beneficiary, but as an aim, i.e., so that organisms can maintain themselves and be eternally active as members of their kind, as far as possible (*DA* II.4, 415a28–b7). Likewise, human practical reasoning that chooses according to this *horos* prescribes for the sake of god – not as a beneficiary (for, once more, god is immortal),

¹⁴ Düring (1961: 196–198) attributes this passage to the *Protrepticus*, but the passage appears as part of a longer section (5, 34.5–36.26) whose origin is disputed. Allan (1975: 260–261) accepts that the thought “comes ultimately from Aristotle.” Hutchinson and Johnson (unpublished work A) attribute the passage to Aristotle.

but instead as an aim (*EE* VIII.3, 1249b13–16). Such practical reasoning prescribes so that mortal human beings can contemplate god and attain their proper human good by being eternally active *as* human beings as far as possible.¹⁵

8.3 Self-Awareness and Friendship's Limitations in the *Nicomachean Ethics*

The *Protrepticus* has resources, then, for explaining how contemplating the divine provides useful cognitive access to boundary markers of the human good. As Aristotle's remarks on Lynceus and his keen powers of perception suggest, contemplating the divine provides *theôroi* with a certain *self-knowledge*, an understanding of their nature, limits, and proper good as human beings. For its part, the *Protrepticus* insists that philosophers attain such self-knowledge indirectly, by contemplating the divine.¹⁶

The *Protrepticus* suggests an answer to the question of how contemplators can derive boundary markers of the human good by contemplating divine objects. This answer is, alas, one that appears in the *Protrepticus*. So, does Aristotle commit himself a similar view in the *Nicomachean Ethics*? Does he suggest there that the best kind of contemplation is useful for providing agents a similar kind of clarity about themselves?

Yes. Aristotle indicates that the *phronimos* possesses a kind of self-knowledge: “the one knowing about himself, and spending time on himself, seems to be *phronimos*” (δοκεῖ ὁ τὰ περὶ αὐτὸν εἰδὼς καὶ διατρίβων φρόνιμος εἶναι: *EN* VI.8, 1142a1–2). In what follows, I argue that the *Nicomachean Ethics* has resources for explaining how agents attain self-knowledge through contemplation. I base my proposal on *EN* VIII–IX's account of how agents attain self-awareness through contemplating friends – a self-awareness, however, which *EE* VII.12 and *MM* II.15's parallel discussions of friendship describe as a sort of self-knowledge.

Indeed, Aristotelian discussions of friendship often assimilate (self-) perceiving to (self-) knowing. *EE* VII.12, 1244b23–29 identifies living as

¹⁵ As *EE* VIII.3, 1249a21–b6 and *Protrepticus* 10, 54.12–22/B46 indicate, and as discussed in Section 7.6, medical contexts inform Aristotle's *horos* metaphors. But as noted in Section 7.6, the origin of such metaphors lies in the geographical *horos*, which demarcates regions of land. In that light, it is striking that some such *horoi* also demarcated the borders of sacred land belonging to gods from land belonging to human beings. These *horoi* separated, spatially, the divine from the (merely) human. See Horster (2010). Aristotle discusses sacred land suited for religious service and distinguished from land appropriate for (merely) human public and private affairs. See *Politics* II.8, 1267b30–37 (on Hippodamus' proposals); cf. VII.10, 1330a10–15; Plato, *Laws* V.738c–e.

¹⁶ On self-knowledge in Aristotle, see Elders (1972, 25–43); Oehler (1974); Lewis (1995). On ancient Greek views on self-knowledge, see Wilkins (1917); North (1966); Courcelle (1974: ch. 1).

“perceiving and knowing” (τὸ αἰσθάνεσθαι καὶ τὸ γνωρίζειν), and holds that living is a “certain knowledge” (γνώσιν τινά). On this basis, *EE* VII.12 explicitly describes self-perception as a kind of self-knowledge (1244b33–34; 1245a5–10; a35–37). The mirror imagery of *MM* II.15, 1213a20–26 portrays viewing oneself in a mirror as an analogue of knowing oneself in contemplating a friend.¹⁷ Given Aristotle’s other ocular metaphors for knowledge (e.g., the use of εἰδέναι at *Metaphysics* A.1, 980a22), such assimilation should not be surprising.

In *EN* IX.9, as elsewhere, Aristotle suggests a sophisticated account of how one attains self-awareness indirectly. As I argue, however, Aristotle’s account of how one attains self-awareness does not end with *EN* IX.9’s account of how one comes to understand oneself by contemplating a human friend. On the contrary, I suggest, Aristotle believes that one completes one’s self-awareness ultimately by contemplating the divine.¹⁸ This proposal, I recognize, will be surprising. Yet even those readers who resist this thesis, despite the textual evidence that I provide for it, can still grant that Aristotle at least could have held the view that I attribute to him. Aristotle, in other words, at least has resources for explaining how contemplating the divine can be useful in the relevant way.

EN IX.9 offers various reasons for why the blessedly happy agent will need (δεήσεται) friends. Consider Aristotle’s first argument (1169b28–1170a4), which begins with the thought that virtuous people’s actions are good and pleasant in themselves (1169b28–32). Thus, virtuous people would also find contemplating their “own proper” (οἰκεῖον) actions good and pleasant in itself (1169b33). Although virtuous people face impediments in contemplating their own proper activity, virtuous people can behold their virtuous friends. “We can contemplate (θεωρεῖν) our neighbors more than ourselves and their actions [more] than our own proper” actions (1169b33–35). When virtuous people contemplate their virtuous friends, they contemplate their friends performing actions and displaying virtues of their “own proper” sort (1169b35–1170a1). Hence, virtuous people will need virtuous friends to contemplate their “own proper” actions and character (1170a2–4).

¹⁷ As Schollmeier (1994: 188) notes, *MM* II.15, 1213a26 uses γνωρίζειν in its references to self-knowledge; but in *MM* I.34, 1196b21–26, the objects of γνωρίζειν include such perceptible qualities as sound, flavor, and color.

¹⁸ The closest approximations I have found of the view I defend here – viz., that the exercise of *sophia* is required for a certain kind of robust self-awareness or understanding of one’s nature and one’s good – appear in Code (1984: 2) and J. Lear (1988: 8–10). They suggest that systematic understanding of the cosmos is required for self-understanding, though they do not discuss the friendship theme. See also the suggestive, though undeveloped, remarks in Chroust (1973: 229). From a very different perspective, see Garver (2006: 203) on *sophia* as a mode of self-knowledge.

Here, Aristotle's argument plays on two senses of the word οἰκεῖον. (1) If *A* is virtuous, then *A*'s friend *B*, *qua* virtuous, is similar to *A*, and *B*'s actions are the sort *A* himself performs. That is, *B*'s virtuous actions are *A*'s *own* sort of actions. (2) The friend's actions are οἰκεῖον, normatively, as being *proper for* one. So, *qua* virtuous, *B* performs the actions that are proper for *A* to perform as a human being – i.e., virtuous actions. At the same time, Aristotle appeals to certain impediments that virtuous people face in contemplating their own proper actions and character. In acting for the sake of ends, we cannot make ourselves the focal objects of awareness, lest we interrupt the smooth flow of our action.¹⁹ In light of our limitations, Aristotle thinks that friends help to meet our needs for self-awareness. They enable us to contemplate our “own proper” activity.

Aristotle offers a more detailed argument for the same general view at 1170a14–b10. Stated with maximum concision, the second argument holds that the virtuous person's perception of his own virtuous activity is good and pleasant for its own sake (1170a14–b5). But the friend is “another self” (ἕτερος αὐτός) to the virtuous person: the virtuous person is related to his friend as he is related toward himself (1170b5–7). Hence, the virtuous person's perceiving his friend's activity is choiceworthy for its own sake for the virtuous person (1170b7–8). Lest he be needy in some key respect, the virtuous person needs that which is choiceworthy for its own sake (1170b14–18). Therefore, the virtuous person will need friends. Aristotle's first argument refers explicitly to contemplation (1169b33; 1170a2), and his second argument refers to perceiving. Yet I take Aristotle's second argument to elaborate on the first. That is, the sort of perceiving with which the second argument is concerned is a contemplative beholding of the friend and his activity.²⁰

To get a clearer sense of how friends elicit self-awareness, consider how these Aristotelian works describe them: the friend is “another self” (ἄλλος αὐτός: *EN* IX.4 1166a31–32, IX.9 1169b6–7; ἕτερος αὐτός: IX.9 1170b6–7), a “separate self” (αὐτός διαιρετός: *EE* VII.12 1245a35), a “different I” (ἕτερος . . . ἐγώ: *MM* II.15 1213a13; a24). I recognize the (virtuous) friend as αὐτός and ἐγώ to share a likeness of thought and character with me, a likeness that we possess by virtue of sharing and having excellently actualized the same underlying, generically identical human essence.²¹

¹⁹ Cf., e.g., Price (1989: 121–122); Kraut (1989: 143); Whiting (2006: 301).

²⁰ I examine other puzzles surrounding these arguments in Walker (2014).

²¹ See Rorty (1980: 390).

Yet this is only half the story, for I do not see *only* myself in my friend. Instead, I recognize the friend as διαιρετός, ἄλλος, and ἕτερος – again, as a separate source of virtuous agency in the world. Aristotle says that children are “other selves by being separated” (ἕτεροι αὐτοὶ τῷ κεχωρίσθαι: *EN* VIII.12, 1161b28–29) from their parents, initially perhaps by simply constituting distinct, embodied human forms. *MM* I.33, however, suggests that we are “separate” in a fuller sense insofar as we develop our powers for rational self-direction: a son “is separated” (χωρισθῆ) from his father upon attaining mature adulthood, a time at which the son no longer remains under the father’s rational direction and authority (1194b15–17).²²

In contemplating a virtuous friend, then, I take intrinsic pleasure in contemplating a being *like* me, but also *different* and *separate* from me. In this contemplation, I come to be aware of, or to know, myself. In perceiving a friend who is like me, but distinct and separate from me, I sense *my* likeness, but also my distinctness and separateness, from my friend. I can grasp these features of *my* agency not insofar as I view my other self simply as part of me, or as a tool of mine, but rather, insofar as I take pleasure in my friend and his independent, virtuous activity for their own sakes.

How beneficial are friends as sources of self-awareness? Here is one worry. Perhaps either (1) I am aware that my friend is like me because I am aware of myself, or else (2) I am unaware that my friend is like me because I lack self-awareness. If (1) obtains, then I apparently do not need a friend to be aware of myself. Yet if (2) obtains, I apparently will not know whom to contemplate if I wish to be aware of myself. In either case, the thought that we need friends as sources of self-awareness seems problematic.²³

This worry, however, rests on a false dichotomy. The agent’s options are not restricted to possessing self-awareness sufficient to identify, *and to carry on without*, “other selves” (on the one hand) and to being *utterly lacking* in self-awareness without friends, and so, to being unable to identify the “other selves” in contemplation of whom one attains awareness of oneself (on the other). Instead, Aristotle allows that we possess some degree of self-awareness without friends and that this low-grade self-awareness enables

²² See N. Sherman (1987: 607); cf. *EN* V.6, 1134b9–12. On the significance of the friend’s *difference* in one’s obtaining self-awareness, see Cooper ([1977] 1999: 342–343); Nussbaum (1986: 355); Price (1989: 121); Brink (1999: 264); L. Pangle (2003: 152–154).

²³ For a *Meno*-styled worry along these lines, see Whiting (2012: 123).

us to identify other selves when we encounter them. He emphasizes that a kind of self-awareness pertains to all of our action, so that not all self-awareness requires friends (*EN* IX.9, 1170a29–31; cf. *DA* III.2, 425b12; *EN* III.1, 1111a7–8). A basic level of self-awareness may suffice *for recognizing friends*: it provides one enough awareness of one's agency and character to recognize the agency and character of certain others as relevantly akin to one's own. Yet such basic self-awareness is insufficient either *for adequate self-awareness* or *for happiness*. Given its limitations, such basic self-awareness proves too incomplete to be satisfying in itself.

As sources of self-awareness, however, friends have two significant limitations. The first limitation of friends is an *in-practice* one. Although I attain awareness about my soul and its powers in contemplating the friend, my friend is incapable of exercising intellect all the time, continuously. In particular, my friend is incapable of continuously exercising contemplative *nous* in accord with the virtue of *sophia*. Hence, in contemplating the friend, I am bound to have a less-than-perspicuous view of the life-function that I am “most of all” (*EN* X.7, 1178a7). Aristotle hints how hazy our grasp of contemplative *nous* in the friend is apt to be. *EN* IX.12 mentions drinking, playing dice, practicing athletics, hunting, and philosophizing as the sorts of activities that friends share together (1172a3–5). Only in the last activity, philosophizing together, would contemplative *nous* come fully to light.²⁴ Further, one faces the practical issue of finding friends in one's community able to exercise *sophia*. Given the requirements of becoming wise, finding a *sophos* friend may well prove arduous.

The second limitation of friends is an *in-principle* one. Suppose that one could somehow overcome the practical obstacles to cognizing contemplative *nous* in friends. Even then, Aristotle thinks, one's grasp of contemplative *nous* will remain obscure if one observes *only* the contemplative *nous* of other human beings. Aristotle elsewhere holds that to grasp some function

²⁴ While Aristotle identifies us at *EN* IX.4, 1166a22–23 and IX.8, 1168b34–1169a3 “most of all” (μάλιστα) with our power for *nous*, Aristotle is unclear in Book IX whether he means to identify us with practical or contemplative *nous*. As for the question of what sort of *nous* Aristotle is claiming here that we “most of all” are, the most conservative – and to my mind, defensible, reading – would deny that Aristotle is necessarily referring in these passages to either of the two kinds of *nous* that he has distinguished in Book VI.1. Rather, as discussed in [Chapter 6](#), one does best to see Aristotle referring in Book IX to a general power for intellect that has both practical and contemplative aspects. Ultimately, *EN* X.7–8 will refine the account of Book IX and argue that since contemplative *nous* is ultimately higher and more complete than practical *nous*, we are ultimately “most of all” contemplative *nous*. Cf. Kraut (1989: 128–131), who nevertheless thinks Aristotle refers to practical *nous* in Book IX.

F most completely, one must grasp *F* in its best or most fully realized form or state. For instance, to understand the power for touch in, say, river crocodiles, one requires some grasp of that power as human beings exercise it. For on Aristotle's view, human touch is the best realized *kind* of touch. It possesses a level of discrimination and power that other kinds of touch simply lack (*DA* II.9, 421a16–23; *HA* I.15, 494b16–17; cf. *GA* II.4, 737b26–27). Suppose, then, that some other kind of contemplative *nous* shows more completeness or perfection (or more continuity and activity) than human contemplative *nous*. If so, then contemplators would best understand human *nous* by studying this other, divine kind of contemplative *nous*.

Does the Aristotle of the *Nicomachean Ethics* think, then, that we possess a source of self-awareness free from the inherent limitations of friends? Or does he think that we are simply stuck with these inherently limited resources for self-awareness? I argue that Aristotle thinks that we do have a better resource for self-awareness, one whose role is both analogous to, yet importantly different from, that of friends. Hence, I contend, Aristotle denies that we are limited to the sort of self-awareness that we attain through contemplating friends.

We do not know the composition dates for the various books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Perhaps Books VIII–IX, in virtue of their internal unity and focus on friendship, constitute an independent treatise inserted into the *Nicomachean Ethics*. As discussed in [Section 1.2](#), however, I believe the *Nicomachean Ethics* shows a discernable unity, one uncompromised by its sharing books with the *Eudemian Ethics*. As I suggested, even if Books VIII–IX originally stood alone, their extended discussion of friendship fits well within the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a whole, just as *EE* VII's extended discussion fits well within that work.²⁵ From the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues for the importance of virtue and external goods (including friends) for the happy life. But Aristotle introduces Book VIII by holding that “friendship is a certain virtue, or with virtue; and further, most necessary to life” (1155a3–5). And Aristotle identifies friends as the greatest of external goods (*EN* IX.9, 1169b8–10). Given

²⁵ This other treatise does not emphasize the value of external goods in the happy life to the same degree as the *EN*. Yet the *EE* does justify its extended discussion of friendship in a work on happiness: political science aims at promoting friendship; friends are main objects of virtuous action; friendship is akin to the virtues of friendliness and justice; a friendless life lacks something of special significance; and some kinds of justice are fixed by law, but others – justice in relation to friends – is up to us (*EE* VII.1, 1234b18–1235a4). Simpson (2013a: 335) identifies ways that *EE* VII fits integrally within the work as a whole.

the special significance of friends and friendship, then, it is reasonable for Aristotle to highlight these topics.²⁶

Further, as multiple commentators have observed, the placement of Books VIII–IX before Book X makes good structural sense. For *EN* VIII–IX’s account of friendship (and of contemplation’s role in friendship) prefigures Aristotle’s remarks on theoretical contemplation in *EN* X.7–8.²⁷ The theoretical contemplation that Aristotle identifies as complete happiness in Book X differs from the sort of contemplation (of friends) that he discusses in Book IX (at least) by virtue of its respective objects. Nevertheless, both activities remain contemplative. And *EN* X.7–8 suggests that while contemplating friends is like theoretical contemplation in various respects, theoretical contemplation is more complete in those respects. The former kind of contemplation approximates the latter. (1) Just as Aristotle calls attention to the pleasantness of contemplating the friends with whom we engage in virtuous action (e.g., at *EN* VIII.5, 1157b25–28; IX.9, 1169b30–1170a4; 1170b1–12), Aristotle describes theoretical contemplation in *EN* X.7 as the most pleasant (ἡδίστη) of activities according to virtue (1177a22–27). (*EN* X.1–6 provide a natural transitional discussion of pleasure, completeness, and activity.) (2) Aristotle argues in *EN* IX.9 that the contemplation of friends is required for the happy person’s self-sufficiency (1169b8–21). In *EN* X.7, Aristotle argues that self-sufficiency exists “most of all” in theoretical contemplation (1177a27–b1). (3) Aristotle argues in Books VIII–IX that we love and contemplate the (virtuous) friend for his own sake (ἐκείνου ἕνεκα) and not primarily for instrumental reasons (*EN* VIII.2, 1155b31; VIII.3 1156a10–12, 1156b7–12; VIII.4, 1157a16–20; VIII.7, 1159a9–10; IX.4, 1166a2–5; IX.9, 1169b33, 1170a2). Aristotle argues at *EN* X.7, 1177b1–4, however, that only theoretical contemplation seems to be loved (altogether) for its own sake (δι’ αὐτὴν ἀγαπᾶσθαι). (4) Aristotle identifies the activities that friends enjoy together (and in which they contemplate each other) as leisured activities (*EN* IX.12, 1172a1–8). Yet at *EN* X.7, 1177b4–15, Aristotle describes theoretical contemplation as the most leisured activity (since it is loved altogether for itself and not for any higher ends). (Additionally, Aristotle argues that friendships make our activity more continuous [συνεχέστερα: *EN* IX.9, 1170a6–8]; in *EN* X.7, however, he maintains that theoretical contemplation is the most continuous [συνεχέστατη] activity [1177a21–22]. Aristotle,

²⁶ On *EN* VIII–IX in relation to earlier themes in the *EN*, see Pakaluk (2011: 39).

²⁷ See, e.g., Rorty (1980: 378); Kahn (1981: 27); M. Miller (1991: 112); L. Pangle (2003: 199–200).

however, does not address whether friendships promote continuous activity in virtue of their contemplative aspects.)

In various ways, then, *EN* X.7–8 extends Book IX’s various remarks on contemplation’s choiceworthiness. Book IX, however, highlights contemplation’s capacity to elicit self-awareness as one of contemplation’s distinctly choiceworthy features. Therefore, it is *prima facie* reasonable to expect *EN* X.7–8 also to extend IX.9’s account of contemplation’s choiceworthiness as a source of self-awareness.²⁸

8.4 Reflections of the *Alcibiades* in Aristotle

The parallels between Aristotle’s remarks on contemplation of friends in *EN* IX.9 and his remarks on theoretical contemplation in *EN* X.7–8 are perhaps suggestive. Does any independent evidence, however, support the thought that *EN* X.7–8 *intentionally* extends IX.9’s account of contemplation as a source of self-awareness and calls attention to a source of self-awareness free from the inherent limitations of friends?

Yes. In Aristotle’s broader context, an intellectual resource of the right sort – the Platonic *Alcibiades* – suggests a way to overcome the limitations that friends possess in eliciting self-awareness. According to the view developed in the *Alcibiades*, one gains self-awareness through contemplating other human souls. But one completes one’s self-awareness – which the *Alcibiades*, like some of Aristotle’s ethical works, speaks of in terms of self-knowledge – in contemplating god.

It will be useful to see whether *EN* X.7–8 develops and refines *EN* IX.9’s views on the role of contemplation in self-awareness by making the extension that the *Alcibiades* does – viz., that contemplating god completes human self-awareness. Here are three reasons why. (1) The *Alcibiades*’ thought that we know ourselves by contemplating ourselves in a reflective surface shows probable influence on *MM* II.15, which argues that, given human limitations, we attain self-knowledge by viewing others who mirror us. It is natural to find a similar view of friends as something *like* mirrors in *EN* IX.9.²⁹ (2) The sort of contemplation that *EN* X.7–8 identifies as

²⁸ As noted, *EE* VII.12 offers a rich account of how we know ourselves in friendship. Unlike *EN* X.7–8, however, *EE* VIII says nothing about theoretical contemplation’s completeness as an activity. Hence, I do not claim that *EE* VIII extends the previous book’s discussion of friendship.

²⁹ On lovers as mirrors, cf. also Plato, *Phaedrus* 255d. On the *Alcibiades* and the *MM*, see, e.g., Wilkins (1917: 85); Cooper ([1977] 1999: 343n12); Annas (1985: 117n23). Renaud and Tarrant (2015: 98–102) note similarities between the *Alcibiades* and the *MM*, but deny intertextuality in light of certain differences (e.g., the *MM*, unlike the *Alcibiades*, does not concern lovers, only friends). Still, the

complete happiness invites comparison with the sort of contemplation that the *Alcibiades* thinks completes our self-knowledge: both types of contemplation include god among their objects. (3) Finally, multiple textual parallels between the *Alcibiades* and *EN* X.7–8 provide evidence that Aristotle is engaging with Platonic views in passages of X.7–8 that mirror passages from the *Alcibiades*.

In antiquity, the *Alcibiades* possessed a sterling reputation.³⁰ It was accepted as authentic by Thrasyllus.³¹ In his *Life of Alcibiades* 1, Plutarch implicitly concurs in this judgment.³² Such was the *Alcibiades*' reputation that certain teachers recommended reading the dialogue first as an introduction to Plato.³³ So did later neo-Platonist commentators such as Olympiodorus and Proclus.³⁴ The *Alcibiades*' authorship has been significantly disputed only since Schleiermacher first cast doubt on it in the nineteenth-century, partly on the basis that it “appears to us but very insignificant and poor, and that to such a degree that we cannot ascribe it to Plato.”³⁵ Schleiermacher believed the dialogue lacking in Socratic irony; he charged that it lacked sufficiently Platonic philosophical content; and he found the dialogue's portrayal of Alcibiades at odds with his depiction in the *Protagoras* and *Symposium*.³⁶ Many contemporary commentators – unpersuaded by this judgment, and more impressed by both the *Alcibiades*' ancient reputation and the dialogue's actual dramatic and philosophical content – have been willing to accept the work.³⁷

Alcibiades' mirror imagery is striking, and it would be surprising for the *MM* not to have been influenced by it, assuming, as I do here, that the *Alcibiades* predated it.

Renaud and Tarrant (2015: 97) deny any close link between the *Alcibiades* and the *EN*'s account of self-awareness. In the *Nicomachean* passage, as opposed to the *Alcibiades*, they contend, “visual language is not present, and the context is not one of self-knowledge.” Yet *EN* IX.9's reference to contemplating friends (1169b33–35) has strong visual resonances. Perceptual language is more explicit in Aristotle's longer argument at 1170a14–b10, which spells out how perceiving a friend enables a pleasant, choiceworthy “perception of oneself” (τὸ αἰσθάνεσθαι αὐτοῦ). As argued in the last section, Aristotle effaces strong distinctions between perceiving and knowing. Hence, the *Nicomachean* context is one of self-knowledge, even if Aristotle does not emphasize that notion. Further, *EE* VII.12 – which Renaud and Tarrant do not discuss – explicitly highlights the role of friends in eliciting self-knowledge (modeled on self-perception).

³⁰ On the work's ancient reception, see Renaud and Tarrant (2015: 6–7, ch. 2–3).

³¹ See Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* III.59; III.62. Thrasyllus and other ancient figures did not uncritically accept all Socratic dialogues then attributed to Plato as authentic. Indeed, they recognized many as spurious. See Denyer (2001: 14).

³² Plutarch attributes “to Plato” the claim that Zopyrus was Alcibiades' tutor. Plutarch can be referring only to *Alcibiades* 122b1–2.

³³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* III.62.

³⁴ Olympiodorus, *On Plato First Alcibiades*, 10.18–11.6; Proclus, *Alcibiades I*, 1–7.

³⁵ Schleiermacher (1836: 329). ³⁶ Schleiermacher (1836: 330–335).

³⁷ For an overview of modern assessments of the work's authenticity, see Pradeau (1999, 219–220). For recent skepticism about the *Alcibiades*' authenticity, see N. D. Smith (2004). In favor of the work's

Assume (only for argument's sake) that Schleiermacher was right and that the *Alcibiades* proves to be less rich in some respects than some other dialogues. Even then, Plato could well have had generic, pedagogical reasons for writing the work in the way he did. Introductory works are rarely the most complex. Given the weight of the dialogue's historical reputation, and given the defeasibility of the arguments against authenticity, I assume that the *Alcibiades* was a Platonic work. Yet my claims need not necessarily imply that the *Alcibiades* was by Plato himself. For instance, as some commentators who remain unconvinced that Plato was the author of any of the *Alcibiades* have allowed, the dialogue could have been by an Academic philosopher in the 350s – a period during which Aristotle was still at the Academy.³⁸ Such an attribution would at least obviate Schleiermacher's stylistic worry.

In the *Alcibiades*, Socrates proposes to Alcibiades that whoever bids us to know ourselves bids us to know (γνώρισαι) our souls (130e7–8). To explain how self-knowledge is possible, Socrates introduces an ocular metaphor. An eye, he says, will see itself in contemplating (θεώμενος) “the best part” of another eye (133a6–7), “that region (ἐκεῖνον τὸν τόπον) in which happens to occur the virtue of the eye” – viz., sight (133b2–5). In looking upon this region – the pupil – one sees one's eye, and indeed one's face, as though in a mirror (132e–133a). Thus, for a soul to know itself, it must look at a soul – “and most of all, that region of it in which occurs the virtue of the soul, wisdom” (καὶ μάλιστα εἰς τοῦτον αὐτῆς τὸν τόπον ἐν ᾧ ἐγγίγνεται ἡ ψυχῆς ἀρετή, σοφία 133b7–10). According to Socrates, no “more divine” region of the soul exists than the noetic region, i.e., “where there is

authenticity, see, e.g., Annas (1985: 111–115); T. Pangle (1987: 1–16) (as part of a defense of the Thrasyllan corpus); Denyer (2001: 14–26); Jirsa (2009) (a complete discussion of, and reply to, the major objections to the dialogue's authenticity). While remaining neutral about authenticity, Renaud and Tarrant (2015: 5) propose that the work “may be interpreted along the same lines as any other dialogue of Plato.” They offer a rich, thoughtful reading of the work, one which, by itself, undermines Schleiermacher's assessment of the work's quality.

³⁸ For this view, see, e.g., Hutchinson's notes to his translation, in Cooper (1997: 558; 573). The main basis for this dating is the dialogue's reference (at 116d8) to the obscure island of Peparethos, which the Athenians had defended against invasion in 361. These events provide some reason for thinking that the *Alcibiades* was written not before 361 (in which case the reference would be insignificant), and not too long after 361 (i.e., before the island reverted to obscurity once again). See Denyer (2001: 152). Against this view, however, Baynham and Tarrant (2012: 216–219) argue that the Peparethos reference could also make sense in light of political events in Peparethos in 340 (i.e., after Plato's death in 347). These authors note, however, that nothing rules out Plato's authorship of the *Alcibiades*. A third option is that the dialogue uses Peparethos as an example of an obscure island to make a point: one requires wisdom, and not merely Athenian provenance, if one is to offer good advice (see Olympiodorus, *On Plato First Alcibiades* 128.17–21). The Peparethos matter aside, my point is simply that one need not assume that the work had to have come from Plato himself to have found its origin in the Platonic Academy.

knowing and understanding” (τὸ εἰδέναι τε καὶ φρονεῖν: 133c1–2). That region of the soul “bears resemblance (ἔοικεν) to god” (133c4). Therefore, Socrates concludes that “someone looking at this and knowing all the divine (πᾶν τὸ θεῖον) – god and understanding (θεὸν τε καὶ φρόνησιν) – thus also would most of all (μάλιστα) know himself” (133c4–6).³⁹

The writing in this part of the dialogue is especially crabbed and the argument proceeds quickly. The exact relation Socrates sees between (1) looking at the noetic region of the soul and (2) knowing the divine (and especially god) is unclear. Yet on any interpretation of 133c, the main point is the same: by contemplating god (either directly or indirectly), one would best know oneself and would see one’s humanity in the “brightest” or “most visible” (ἐναργέστατα) way (132c7).

A possible elucidation of the above passage is provided by 133c8–17, which extends the metaphor and describes god himself to be a mirror in which we can know ourselves:

SOCRATES Just as mirrors are clearer, purer, and brighter than the reflecting surface of the eye, isn’t god both purer and brighter than the best part of our soul?

ALCIBIADES I would certainly think so, Socrates.

SOCRATES So the way that we can best see and know ourselves is to use the finest mirror available and look at god, and, on the human level, at the virtue of the soul.

ALCIBIADES Yes.⁴⁰

As the passage suggests, self-knowledge as knowledge of the human soul and the human good (i.e., as knowledge of “the virtue of the soul”) requires knowledge of god. God serves as a more perspicuous reflective surface for self-knowledge because god possesses those features that we ourselves possess, only more completely. If this passage is authentic, god is outside the soul and is to be contemplated directly. Yet it is hard to know what to do with this passage, which is missing from the original manuscripts and which appears in an excerpt from the *Alcibiades* that shows up in Eusebius. While we should be careful not to put too much weight on 133c8–17, we should not ignore it, either. For it presents one eminently reasonable way of articulating the thought expressed in 133c1–6.⁴¹

³⁹ Olympiodorus omits θεὸν τε καὶ φρόνησιν in c5. Some editors emend θεὸν to νοῦν or θεάν (perhaps to avoid the suggestion that god is in the soul). Since all the manuscripts include θεὸν, I see no independent reason for emendation.

⁴⁰ I use Hutchinson’s translation in Cooper (1997), substituting “god” for “God.”

⁴¹ Renaud and Tarrant (2015: 187–189) identify the passage as a Christian interpolation. Both Annas (1985: 132) and Foucault ([2001] 2005: 70–71) think the passage, even if a later addition, highlights

Socrates goes on to suggest that the self-knowledge obtained through looking at god provides practical guidance. By keeping the divine in view, Socrates tells Alcibiades and the city, “you will see and know yourselves and the things that are good for you” (134d7–8). On that basis – and by showing the kind of care (ἐπιμέλεια) that Socrates repeatedly says is necessary for success in ordering oneself and one’s city (e.g., 119a9; 120c8–d4; 123d4–e1; 124b2–3; 132b6–c2) – Alcibiades and the city will act “correctly and well” (ὀρθῶς τε καὶ εὖ: 134d10). Those who know themselves and the things good for them will perform just and temperate actions; and by so acting, they will be acting in a “god-beloved” (θεοφιλῶς) way (134d1–2).⁴²

Now, compare this whole section of the *Alcibiades* against Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. (1) *EN* X.7’s discussion begins, as I have suggested, against the background of Book IX’s discussion of self-awareness through contemplating others. *Alcibiades* 133a–b accepts the main conceptual point that this is how we know ourselves. (2) Like *Alcibiades* 132e–133c, *EN* X.7 identifies contemplative *nous* as divine: Aristotle maintains that the noetic aspect of the human soul is either “divine or the most divine of the things in us” (1177a15–16; b27–32). (3) *Alcibiades* 133b–c claims that human *nous* and *sophia* resemble god’s. For his part, Aristotle says that contemplative *nous* and its activity in accord with *sophia* are “most akin” (συγγενεστάτη; *EN* X.8, 1178b23; 1179a26) to the gods and their eternally active – and superlatively happy – contemplation (see 1178b7–24). This point suggests that divine thinking is paradigmatically noetic and that our exercise of contemplative *nous* approximates divine thought. (4) Whereas *Alcibiades* 133b8 says that *nous* is “most of all” where one should look for oneself, Aristotle says that contemplative *nous* is “most of all” (μάλιστα) oneself (*EN* X.7, 1178a7).⁴³

what we can independently find in the text. Meanwhile, D. Johnson (1999: 11–14) offers a detailed defense of the passage’s authenticity. Cf. Bluck (1953: 46n2).

⁴² Forms of πράττειν appear seven times between 134d1–134e5. Contra Hutchinson’s translation in Cooper (1997), but with D. Johnson (1999), Denyer (2001), and others, I assume *Alcibiades* 134d is authentic.

⁴³ Some of the parallels I discuss are also noted by Pépin (1971: 80–84) and C. Gill (2006: 4–9; 352–355). Renaud and Tarrant (2015: 94–96) also note some of these parallels. But they deny that Aristotle engages with the *Alcibiades* in *EN* X. They do so primarily on the grounds that “direct similarities . . . are very limited” and that most similarities are “conceptual rather than linguistic.” In response, I believe that the linguistic similarities, which I outline in this section, are more numerous than they grant. Further, the large number of conceptual similarities is striking, especially when one considers both *EN* IX and X together. These similarities suggest that, even if Aristotle was not borrowing from the *Alcibiades*, both the *Alcibiades* and Aristotle are borrowing from some original, shared source, e.g., discussions in the Academy.

But if one attains awareness of oneself by contemplating a kindred “other self” in shared activity; if *nous* is one’s “most divine” psychic power and the power that is “most of all” oneself; and if god exercises this “most divine” power of *nous* in a paradigmatic way (so that god is structurally similar to “another self”), then contemplating god would provide one a source of self-awareness free from the limitations of friends.

Given the textual similarities between the *Alcibiades* and *EN* X.7–8, it is reasonable to think that Aristotle is intentionally borrowing Academic views that appear in the *Alcibiades*. The *Nicomachean Ethics* could be borrowing directly from the *Alcibiades*. On behalf of this view, one can point to multiple other parallels between the *Alcibiades* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁴⁴ One can also point to parallels between the *Alcibiades* and the *Protrepticus*.⁴⁵ Yet, as noted, one need not assume that Aristotle is responding directly to the *Alcibiades*. Aristotle could be borrowing from an original source – perhaps discussions in the Academy – to which he and the *Alcibiades*’ author both shared access. The thought that self-knowledge might involve a certain mirroring relation, after all, appears elsewhere in Plato. At *Phaedrus* 255d, for instance, Socrates says that, in spending time with a lover, a beloved “does not realize that he is seeing himself in the lover as in a mirror.”⁴⁶ Moreover, the thought that self-knowledge might depend on understanding the divine was apparently discussed in the Lyceum. Consider the report of Aristoxenus, a late fourth-century Peripatetic and student of Aristotle, of an alleged meeting between Socrates and an Indian: “[O]ne of these men met Socrates in Athens and inquired from him about what kind of activity he was pursuing

⁴⁴ (1) In the *Alcibiades*, Socrates repeatedly emphasizes the need to exercise ἐπιμελεία, which he says is necessary for success in ordering oneself and one’s city (e.g., at 119a9; 120c8–d4; 123d4–e1; 124b2–3; 132b6–c2). Similarly, Aristotle claims that all things being equal, *eudaimonia* is open to anyone “through a certain learning and care” (διὰ τινος μαθήσεως καὶ ἐπιμελείας: *EN* I.9, 1099b19–20; cf. *EN* X.9, 1180a1–4; 1180b23–25; 1180b25–28). On the *Alcibiades* and *Nicomachean Ethics* on care for the soul, see de Haas (2009: 68). (2) Like *Alcibiades* 134d, *EN* X.8 says that by attending to the activity of *nous* in accord with *sophia*, one becomes “most god-beloved” (θεοφιλέστατος: 1179a24; 1179a30). (3) In *Nicomachean Ethics* X.8, 1179a25–29 (which echoes *Alcibiades* 134d1–2), Aristotle maintains that the gods have reason to return benefit to theoretical contemplators “as caring for (ἐπιμελουμένων) the things loved by them and acting both correctly and finely” (ὁρθῶς τε καὶ καλῶς). (4) Other commentators note other parallels. Annas (1985: 117n23) argues that Aristotle’s account of *homonoia* in the city at *EN* IX.6 shows Aristotle’s familiarity with *Alcibiades* 124d–127d. Denyer (2001: 109) compares *Alcibiades* 107dff with *EN* II.3, 1104b22–24 and *EE* II.4, 1222a1–2. Friedländer (1964: 231–232) finds a parallel between the *Alcibiades* and fragments of Aristotle’s *Eroticus* (fr. 96, Rose, 3rd edn.): “Aristotle said that lovers look to no other part of the bodies of their beloved than their eyes, in which modesty dwells” (ROT).

⁴⁵ For a listing, see, e.g., Bluck (1953: 47–48); Renaud and Tarrant (2015: 94–95).

⁴⁶ Translation from Nehamas and Woodruff, in Cooper (1997).

as a philosopher. Socrates answered that it consists in investigations about human life. The Indian started to laugh at him, saying that it is not possible for anyone to understand human matters without considering divine ones.” The Indian’s view invites comparison with the thesis advanced in the *Alcibiades*.⁴⁷ Yet the *Alcibiades* aside, one may reasonably speculate that such stories about Socrates passed down from the Academy to the Lyceum.

In sum, Book X (intentionally, I argue) gives us everything but an explicit statement of the view presented in the *Alcibiades*, viz., that one completes one’s self-awareness in contemplating god. Thus, just as Aristotle’s account of contemplation’s value extends beyond Book IX and completes itself in Book X, Book IX’s account of how one attains self-awareness through contemplation extends beyond Book IX’s remarks on contemplating friends and completes itself in Book X’s remarks on theoretical contemplation of the divine.

Suppose that Aristotle thinks that one completes one’s self-awareness in contemplating god. Why, then, is Aristotle not more explicit about this point in *EN* X.7–8? Should not Aristotle call attention to this conclusion, given how striking it is?⁴⁸ In response, Aristotle could have presentation reasons to avoid foregrounding contemplation’s role in eliciting self-awareness. *EN* X.7–8’s remarks on theoretical contemplation’s specific valuable features, I have argued, allude to *EN* IX.9’s earlier remarks on the valuable features of contemplating friends. Yet Aristotle here never *explicitly* refers to *EN* IX.9. That is, Aristotle never explicitly says in *EN* X.7–8 that he is picking up on his earlier remarks about the value of contemplating friends – perhaps because that would complicate *EN* X.7–8’s discussion of complete happiness. Nevertheless, he implicitly (and intentionally) performs just this task.

Similarly, Aristotle may well think that it suffices *implicitly* to present the view that theoretical contemplation completes the sort of self-awareness that *EN* IX.9 addresses. For Aristotle may find it difficult enough to defend the controversial claim that theoretical contemplation constitutes our complete happiness without *also* having to argue (explicitly and simultaneously) that contemplating the divine completes our self-awareness.⁴⁹ Explicitly

⁴⁷ Aristoxenus, fr. 53 [Wehrli], quoted, translated, and discussed by Lacrosse (2007: 248), who notes similarities to the *Alcibiades*. Jaeger (1962: 165) finds parallels between this passage, the *Alcibiades*, and both the *Protrepticus* and *EE*. Aristoxenus’ report recalls an anecdote about Socrates that Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, II.45, directly attributes to Aristotle himself. (In Diogenes Laertius, the anecdote concerns Socrates’ encounter with a visiting magician from Syria.)

⁴⁸ According to Renaud and Tarrant (2015: 96), “Certainly there is no hint in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that Aristotle thinks he is following another author’s thought.”

⁴⁹ As Natali (2007: 371) observes, “Aristotle has the tendency to *introduce new themes and topics in the discussion in an inconspicuous way*, during the discussion of other topics, and to come back to them afterwards. Aristotle seems to try not to alarm his audience by introducing too many new ideas too

returning to IX.9's points on contemplation's role in self-awareness may simply interfere with X.7–8's immediate pedagogical aims. Aristotle, after all, aims to elucidate the happiest life for his audience, not to highlight or footnote parallels between Platonic and Aristotelian views.

Nevertheless, given Aristotle's views, and given, more specifically, what *EN* X.7–8 says about theoretical contemplation, the conclusion that contemplating god is a source of self-awareness is a natural one to draw. Aristotle's defense of contemplation as complete happiness identifies theoretical contemplation of the divine as the most godlike activity (e.g., at 1177b26–1178a2). But in other works – e.g., *Metaphysics* Λ.9 – Aristotle maintains that god's eternally active, happy life consists in a kind of self-contemplation. If so, then theoretical contemplation would stand to be godlike insofar as it enabled theoretical contemplators also to contemplate themselves. Theoretical contemplators, in other words, would approximate god's activity (in part) by contemplating god and by thus attaining full self-awareness.⁵⁰

Suppose, however, that, contrary to all the evidence I have provided, Aristotle does not intentionally hold that human beings complete their self-awareness in contemplating the divine. Even then, Aristotle at least has the proximate *resources* for addressing the third wave (the issue of how contemplating the divine could be useful for obtaining *horoi* of the human good). That the third wave need not pose a problem for Aristotle would be an important enough conclusion to highlight. Nevertheless, I believe that the textual evidence shows that Aristotle does in fact hold the view that I attribute to him.

8.5 Contemplation and Awareness of the Good in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7–8

Would it not be strange for Aristotle to think that contemplating god completes an agent's self-awareness? At first glance, perhaps yes. The Prime Mover may appear too impersonal an object of contemplation. God, after all, is not a friend of the contemplator, and Aristotle explicitly denies that

abruptly, but rather aims to lead them slowly and carefully from one point to another" (Natali's italics). Further, recall Aristotle's hesitancy to introduce distracting precision into his discussions (see [Section 7.3](#)).

⁵⁰ My aim in this chapter is not to argue that self-awareness possesses an important place in *eudaimonia*. Yet one can nevertheless understand how Aristotle could accept this point. If contemplation constitutes our complete happiness insofar as it is godlike, and if such contemplation is godlike, in part, by approximating the god's self-contemplative activity, then self-awareness would constitute (part of) complete happiness.

god needs friends (*EE* VII.12; *MM* II.15). Further, gods and mortals are too unequal with respect to goods to establish close friendships with each other (*EN* VIII.7, 1158b33–36; 1159a4; cf. *MM* II.11, 1208b27–32). How could god, then, possibly count as anything like “another self”?

For Aristotle, however, one is most of all *nous* and god is *nous* in its paradigmatic form – as fully active divine thinking. Therefore, god would stand to be at least *structurally analogous* to a human “other self.” For god most actively manifests what is “most of all” the contemplator – the contemplator’s power for *nous* and its proper virtue of *sophia*. Hence, Aristotle can argue that one obtains self-awareness in contemplating god in a manner generally *analogous* to the way one obtains self-awareness in contemplating a virtue-friend, even if god is, strictly speaking, neither a friend nor “another self.”

How, then, can contemplating god elicit self-awareness? On the reading of *EN* IX.9 already spelled out, when I contemplate a friend, I recognize my friend as another *self* by virtue of his sharing a *likeness* of thought and character with me, a likeness that I come to perceive through shared virtuous activity. But again, I do not see only myself in a friend. For if I am to love my friend for his own sake, I must recognize my friend not as a part of me, but as *another* self, which is to say, as a *different* or *separate* self. I recognize, contemplate, and take intrinsic pleasure in the friend as a similar, but separate, embodiment of the human form actively and excellently at work in the world. I thereby understand myself in a discriminating awareness of the friend as like, but different, from me (and so, of myself as like, but different, from my friend).

The thought that self-awareness arises in the contemplation of the friend’s likeness and difference also clarifies how one can attain awareness of oneself in contemplating god. I attain self-awareness through contemplating a friend by perceiving the similarities and differences that obtain between my friend and myself insofar as we are members of the same biological kind. Similarly, Aristotle can allow that I obtain self-awareness through perceiving the similarities and differences that obtain between *another kind* of living being – viz., a god – and myself. To explain why, I consider some relevant passages from the *Topics*. These passages focus on definition, the task of elucidating boundary markers. They clarify Aristotle’s views on (1) the general role that a grasp of likeness and difference across kinds plays in knowing things and (2) the specific ways in which human beings are similar to, but distinct from, the gods.

In *Topics* I.18, Aristotle explains the utility of recognizing likeness and difference in coming to recognize what things are. On the one hand, the

contemplation of likeness (ἡ τοῦ ὁμοίου θεωρία) is useful if one is to offer a definition in the case of “things widely separated” (τοῖς πολὺ διεστῶσι) (108b23–24) – for instance, the “calm” of the sea and the “calm” of the wind. On the other hand, “the discovery of differences is useful” (Τὸ . . . τὰς διαφορὰς εὑρεῖν χρήσιμον) in coming to know “what a certain individual is” (πρὸς τὸ γνωρίζειν τί ἕκαστόν ἐστιν: 108a37–b1). To discover what distinguishes one thing from another is useful for separating out (χωρίζειν) “the proper account of the being of each” (τὸν ἴδιον τῆς οὐσίας ἑκάστου λόγον: 108b4–6). These points spell out claims that Aristotle already makes in *Topics* I.16 and I.17. In the former (107b38–108a6), Aristotle says that *differences* (τὰς . . . διαφορὰς) are to be contemplated (θεωρητέον) both within a kind and from one to another (ἐξ ἄλλου πρὸς ἄλλο). In the latter (108a7–17), he affirms that *likeness* is to be investigated (ὁμοιότητα σκεπτέον) both in things belonging to different kinds (τῶν ἐν ἐτέροις γένεσιν) and in things belonging to the same kind (τὰ ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ γένει ὄντα).

One can now see how, for Aristotle, contemplating god elicits a certain kind of self-awareness. The contemplator who exercises his “most divine” capacity in accord with the virtue of *sophia* would have special *kinship* with god. He would, after all, be attending to that “most divine” of human activities and would be engaged in an activity like god’s. The contemplator would also be exercising the capacity that was “most of all” himself, a life-function possessed by god in the most complete way – just as eternal activity. In contemplating god as fully manifesting the *nous* which is “most of all” himself, then, the philosopher would be in the best position to be aware of, or recognize, that power which is “most of all” himself.⁵¹

In contemplating god, however, the contemplator would be in a position to recognize his relative weakness and limitation as compared with god. Hence, in contemplating, the contemplator would be aware of the superiority of god’s contemplation to his own: “And the property of the better is better than the [property] of the inferior, as that of god [is better] than that of the human being; for in respect of what is common (τὰ κοινὰ) in both, there is no difference between them, but in properties the one is superior to the other” (*Topics* III.1, 116b13–17). To be human is to be a “mortal living being receptive of understanding” (ἀνθρώπου τὸ ζῶον θνητὸν ἐπιστήμης δεκτικόν: *Topics* V.1, 128b35–36). Further, it is correct to

⁵¹ Cf. Caston (2006: 341): “The intermittent and imperfect exercise of our capacity for understanding is something that can be fully appreciated only by reference to the most complete and perfect example of understanding, God. It is only then that we understand what understanding really is.”

call both the human being and the god a “living being sharing in understanding” (ζῶον ἐπιστήμης μετέχον: *Topics* V.4, 132b10–13). Still, Aristotle thinks that god’s immortality differentiates god (*Topics* IV.2, 122b37–38).

As I stated earlier, Aristotle allows that contemplators can grasp what a human being is without contemplating the divine, at least to some degree. But for the reasons just mentioned, Aristotle suggests that contemplating the divine completes, and enhances, the contemplator’s grasp of his nature. In contemplating god as both superior to them and their finite and perishable kind of noetic activity, contemplators would simultaneously achieve the sharpest grasp of the boundaries that delimit, yet constitute, their own human identity. Such contemplators would be in a position best to recognize what demarcates their mortal, enmattered sort of noetic life from the divine, immaterial sort. Contemplators would simultaneously be in a position to recognize what distinguishes their form of life from other mortal, enmattered forms of life. Like the self-awareness agents obtain in friendship, such awareness would arise incidentally (and not necessarily directly).

This is roughly the account of how contemplation generates self-awareness that I attributed to the *Protrepticus* in [Section 8.2](#). To see how Aristotle suggests these points in *EN* X, consider *EN* X.8’s remarks on the place of the human good relative to the good of gods and nonhuman animals. Aristotle’s view here, I argue, invites comparison with *Protrepticus* 8’s remarks on Lynceus.

On the one hand, in contemplating god and in discovering our similarity to the divine, we would recognize that we are higher than plants and nonhuman animals. And we thereby become aware of our *lower limits* as human beings. For “the life [pertaining] to human beings, as far as it shares in a certain likeness (ὁμοιωμά τι) of [god’s contemplative] sort of activity, [is blessed]; but of the other animals, none is happy, since in no way does it share in contemplation” (*EN* X.8, 1178b25–27; cf. *EE* I.7, 1217a20–29). Human beings, unlike nonhuman animals, are capable of contemplating god. In, or through, such contemplation – which would bring to light our “certain likeness” to god – we would recognize our kinship with the divine. Hence, we would recognize that the human form is not restricted to the powers of nutrition and growth, sensation and locomotion.⁵²

⁵² Cf. Alfarabi, *The Philosophy of Aristotle*, 72 on the theoretical contemplator: “The more perfect the being he apprehends and understands, the greater his rejoicing and his pleasure with the apprehension. Subsequently man comes to the view that he possesses, because of this apprehension, a certain excellence, nobility, high rank, and exalted position.”

On the other hand, in contemplating god, we would become aware of our relative finitude and recognize our *upper limits* as human beings. We would recognize about ourselves that “the best of the things in the cosmos is not the human being” (*EN* VI.7, 1141a21–22). We would recognize that above the human being, other things exist “far more divine in nature” (*EN* VI.7, 1141b1–2; cf. VIII.7, 1158b36). As Aristotle insists in the passage from *EN* X.8, 1178b25–28 just quoted, the life of human beings is blessed as far as a “certain likeness” of god’s activity pertains to it. True, this passage highlights human life’s resemblance to the divine life. Yet this passage simultaneously suggests that the two lives differ, and that the former approximates the latter. Even if contemplative *nous* is “most of all” what we are, it nevertheless remains (for beings of *our* mortal kind) dependent on other life-functions – viz., the threptic and perceptive powers. Hence, contemplators recognize that they “will be in need also of the external goods, being human; for the nature [of the human being] is not self-sufficient with respect to contemplating, but it is necessary also to be healthy in body and to possess food and the other services” (*EN* X.8, 1178b33–35).⁵³

Therefore, in contemplating god, and in thereby grasping their intermediate place in the cosmos, contemplators grasp how their good as human beings is demarcated from the good of other kinds of living beings. Guided by an awareness of their intermediate status between beast and god, practically wise contemplators will grant special weight to their noetic powers, yet without repressing or ignoring their nonrational desires.⁵⁴

On this basis, one can understand why Aristotle (in *Metaphysics* A.2, 982b28–983a11 and *EN* X.7, 1177b31–33) defends the pursuit of *sophia* against those who argue that such pursuit implicates us in *hubris* and infringes on the sphere of the jealous divinities. Against the poets,

⁵³ Rider (2011: 405–406; 408) offers a similar reading of how contemplation of the divine elicits self-knowledge in Plato, *Alcibiades* 133c. On other differences between divine and human thought, see Modrak (1991: 770).

Aubenque (1963: 165–166) argues that self-knowledge understood as an awareness of one’s limits is among the precepts of the Seven Sages “que nous retrouvons encore associés dans les Éthiques aristotéliennes” in Aristotle’s conception of *phronêsis*. Wood (2011: 407n48) rejects Aubenque’s claim, citing Book X’s admonishment to immortalize ourselves as far as possible. I have argued, however, that immortalizing oneself as far as possible is consistent with recognizing one’s human limits.

⁵⁴ Cf. Irwin (1988: 374–376). On my account, Aristotle can agree with *Alcibiades* 134d1–2 that reference to the divine can guide our acting temperately and justly without having to accept the claim that the gods constitute (immediate) paradigms of ethical perfection (a claim that might seem to conflict with *EN* X.8, 1178b7–21). For the gods illuminate the human good in the indirect way that I sketch here.

Aristotle insists that the gods are not jealous (for nothing can affect them). Hence, while Aristotle breaks with his predecessors by defending the piety of contemplative wisdom, he makes this break because he thinks traditional belief to be impious itself. The poets speak falsely about the nature of the gods (and so fail to grant them proper honor) because the poets actually fail to contemplate the gods adequately. Rather than displaying ignorance of one's station as a human being, then, a diligent form of theoretical contemplation would forestall such *hubris*. It would bring to light not only the similarities, but also the deep differences, between the divine and the human.

To answer the utility question, then, Aristotle can appeal to the role that contemplation of the divine plays in eliciting self-awareness, through which one can derive boundary markers for practical reasoning and thereby attain the intermediate in passion and action. The contemplator attains such insight through the sort of regular, ongoing contemplation that Aristotle recommends as an ultimate end within the happiest life. In other words, the self-awareness that contemplators attain about the boundary markers of their nature and their good – humanity's place in the *scala naturae* – is not a one-time discovery. Instead, it is an insight that contemplators activate anew when and as they contemplate throughout their lives. Such contemplation refreshes and reinvigorates their grasp of their boundaries; it indirectly reinforces their grasp of their own nature. Contemplation thereby reactivates and preserves the contemplator's self-knowledge (cf. *DA* II.5, 417b2–5; *De Memoria* I, 451a12). In these ways, Aristotle can say, regular contemplation is not just choiceworthy for itself, but also useful.

The Anatomy of Aristotelian Virtue

9.1 Desiring Well between Beast and God

So far, I have argued that by regularly contemplating the divine, well-reared human beings attain a certain self-awareness (or self-knowledge), a grasp of their nature and limitations as human beings. Such self-awareness, in turn, provides theoretical contemplators with cognitive access to a *horos* for practical reasoning. Such a standard demarcates the boundaries of excess and deficiency with respect to (1) nonrational desire and (2) the possession and use of external goods. By grasping such a *horos*, which defines correct reason, contemplators perfect their practical reasoning and are in a position to regulate their nonrational desiderative powers well. As aspects of the human *aisthêtikon*, well-regulated, ethically virtuous modes of *epithumia* and *thumos*, authoritatively guided by contemplation and practical reasoning, *subserve* contemplative and practical *nous*. At the same time, such modes of nonrational desire also *guide* good threptic activity. They enable us to meet our nutritive and reproductive needs so that the threptic powers can continue to make contemplation possible. Hence, by providing contemplators with cognitive access to a *horos* for practical reasoning, contemplation indirectly guides such threptic activity, which, in turn, subserves a whole system of higher life-functions – including contemplation. The result: a fully active, harmonized, self-maintaining system of life-functions ordered around, and actively guided by, contemplation. In virtue of its full integration, stable persistence, and complete activity, such life-activity approximates, as far as possible for mortal nature, god's fully active way of being. Such life-activity is most of all fit for the designation *eudaimonia*.

Perhaps one will agree that contemplating the divine could play some role in one's grasping one's nature and good as a human being. But does contemplation provide too thin an understanding of this nature and good? Is the *horos* that I have argued contemplators derive from contemplating

the divine *sufficiently* useful? In this chapter, I spell out how this *horos* helpfully defines correct reason and demarcates the boundaries of ethical excess and deficiency. To that end, I consider the full range of Aristotelian ethical virtues. In each case, I explain how contemplating the divine, and grasping the human good as bounded by the divine and the bestial, defines the *phronimos*'s grasp of the mean.

In what follows, I build on Chapter 6's main conclusions and distinguish the various ethical virtues on the basis of the passions they concern. Here, I adapt, refine, and provide independent evidence for Aquinas' later insight that the different Aristotelian ethical virtues address various forms of *epithumia* and *thumos*.¹ I explain how, for Aristotle, each sphere of ethically virtuous action is bounded by the powers and limitations of human nature in relation to the divine and the bestial.² By explaining how the various ethical virtues are related, sometimes in unexpected ways, I show how Aristotle's table is no mere "bag of virtues" or heap of excellences without discernible structure. Finally, I build on Section 6.3's brief remarks on how ethical virtues perfect nonrational desires in a way conducive to agents' satisfying their basic threptic needs well.³ In doing so, I complete my response to the utility question.

9.2 Temperance

As discussed in *EN* III.10–12, temperance (σωφροσύνη) provides a concise template and entry-way for the rest of Aristotle's table of the ethical virtues.⁴ Moreover, temperance directly concerns *epithumiai* for items that satisfy our basic threptic needs. Hence, I explore this fundamental virtue in extra detail.

According to Aristotle, temperance concerns bodily pleasures (*EN* II.7, 1107b4–6), and is an intermediacy between excessive enjoyment of such pleasures (intemperance) and deficient abstinence (insensibility).

¹ See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II, 60.5 (on distinguishing virtues according to passions, especially *epithumia* and *thumos*).

² Here, I agree with Achtenberg ([1988] 1995: 29–36) and Long (1999: 121–124) (on ethical virtues as states that avoid "subhuman" and "superhuman" extremes).

³ Kraut (1989: 335–338), Tuozzo (1992) (see especially 146–148), and G. Lear (2004: ch. 7) discuss ethical virtue's conduciveness, or approximation, to contemplation. In my terminology, these accounts emphasize the way that ethical virtue enables nonrational desire and practical reasoning to subserve contemplation. Here, I highlight the ways that ethical virtue enables such desire to *guide* threptic activity. Veatch (1962) and Garver (2006: 32–34) make suggestive remarks about the ethically virtuous person's self-knowledge, though their emphases differ from mine.

⁴ North (1966: 200n10) identifies temperance as "the basis of [Aristotle's] ethical system." Similarly, Irwin (2007: 187) describes intemperance as "the paradigmatic vice" for Aristotle.

Temperance, Aristotle says, concerns bodily pleasures, but not all (III.10, 1118a1–3). In particular, temperance is concerned with the pleasures of touch and taste (1118a26). The sort of tasting Aristotle has in mind is largely tactile. Such is the pleasure that river crocodiles take in eating: “For it is in their passage down the gullet that solid edibles cause enjoyment, while it is by the tongue that the savor of fluids is perceived. Thus it is during swallowing that the oiliness, the heat, and other such qualities of food are recognized” (PA IV.11, 690b29–32; ROT). On this basis, Aristotle says that intemperate people seek the pleasure that “comes about entirely through touch” (EN III.10, 1118a30–31). Temperance, then, concerns *epithumiai* for the largely tactile bodily pleasures of food, drink, and sex (1118a30–32).

Aristotle distinguishes between the common (or natural) (κοινὰι) and the “special and added” (ἰδιοὶ καὶ ἐπιθετοὶ) appetites of human beings (III.11, 1118b8–9). The former include the general desires for food and sex *tout court*; the latter are desires for distinct varieties of food and sex (1118b9–15). Aristotle says that we do not typically err with respect to our natural appetites, which seek basic replenishment and take pleasure in “the filling up of a needed lack” (ἀναπλήρωσις . . . τῆς ἐνδείας: 1118b18). Thus, when we need food and drink, we typically pursue them to the point of replenishment. Yet some of us – gluttons, literally “belly-mad people” (γαστρίμαργοι: 1118b19) – pursue our common appetites to excess. Such an excessive disposition constitutes one form of intemperance. Aristotle, however, finds relatively exceptional the “belly-mad” disposition to gorge oneself more when one is already full. More commonly, we go wrong with special appetites: “many miss the mark and in many ways” (1118b21–22).

The intemperate person is disposed to overindulge in bodily pleasures and to be tugged around by *epithumiai* for such pleasures. In accepting the authoritativeness of nonrational desire, he seeks, in a way, to live by perception and nonrational desire. Intemperately seeking bodily pleasure, the intemperate person pursues a life that Aristotle dismisses as fit “for cattle” (EN I.5, 1095b20; see [Section 2.1](#)). The intemperate person overindulges in the pleasures that human beings share in common with “the other animals” (EN III.10, 1118a24–25) and that human beings enjoy “not insofar as we are human beings, but insofar as [we are] animals” (1118b1–3). In elucidating the intemperate person’s standpoint, Aristotle considers a “certain gourmet [who] wished for his throat to become longer than a crane’s, since [he was] taking pleasure in the touch” (1118a32–b1).⁵ The life

⁵ Taylor (2006: 197) plausibly suggests that such tactile pleasures would include that of a full stomach, not just the pleasure of food and drink moving down one’s throat.

of Aristotle's intemperate agent is akin to the unmixed – and so, immoderate – life of pleasure, according to Plato's Socrates: "You would thus not live a human life but the life of a mollusk or of one of those creatures in shells that live in the sea" (*Philebus* 21c).⁶

Qua intemperate, I misconstrue *my* function, the *ergon* that is my task to perform as a human being. In acting, I reveal a kind of self-ignorance about my place relative to the divine and the bestial, and the structure of my soul. I do so by overvaluing the satisfaction of my bodily appetites and tending to live, in a way, by perception. My intemperance displays my ignorance and neglect of my rational, and especially contemplative, powers – powers in virtue of which I bear a special likeness to the divine and that I exercise in contemplating the divine.

But how does intemperance harm the intemperate agent? To begin, the intemperate agent desires bodily pleasures "instead of the other" pleasures (*EN* III.11, 1119a1–3). The intemperate person errs in enjoying the relevant tactile pleasures more than they are worth (1119a19–20). Such people thus neglect their other, higher powers for various kinds of rational activity, including contemplation. For bodily pleasures are strong, and, unrestrained in the soul of the intemperate agent, they interfere with one's pleasure in rational activity (III.12, 1119b10; cf. VII.11, 1152b16–18). Unrestrained *epithumiai* for food, drink, and sex fail to subserve practical and contemplative *nous*. Instead, such *epithumiai* assert authority and impede the soul's higher activities.

Intemperate people, however, go wrong in another way. They pursue their special appetites even when such appetites are harmful to *their threptic activity*. To this extent, intemperate people differ from the temperate, who pursue bodily pleasures "as much as [they conduce] towards health or toward good condition" (πρὸς ὑγίειάν ἐστιν ἢ πρὸς εὐεξίαν: 1119a16), or are not impediments to health and good condition (a17–18). The intemperate err by enjoying "things one should not" to enjoy, and by enjoying otherwise harmless pleasures "not as one should." For such people ignore considerations of overall harm and benefit to their threptic activity in a complete life. Aristotle's account of intemperance thus coheres with his earlier discussion (*EN* III.5, 1114a15–29) of how ethical vice conduces to bodily vice (see [Section 6.5](#)). Although Aristotle says little about the sexually intemperate person, we should expect that this agent desires sex to a degree similarly inconsistent with his overall health and good physical condition. Such a person seeks immediate satisfaction, not in ways

⁶ *Philebus* translations by D. Frede, from Cooper (1997).

consistent with his threptic security through a complete life, but even at its expense, e.g., by pursuing sex at the cost of other goods conducive to threptic security. (When unrestrained *epithumiai* directly impede higher, rational functions, the latter will fail to guide the former. Hence, disharmony in the intemperate person's soul compounds itself.)

I now consider intemperance's contrary vice, insensibility. The insensible person does "not much turn up" (οὐ πᾶντι γίνονται: *EN* III.11, 1119a6, a11). For as animals, we are constitutionally predisposed to seek pleasure (cf. *EN* II.9, 1109b7–8). Struggling in *EE* III.2 to formulate an example of the vice, Aristotle refers to those such as the "rustics (ἀγροίκους) the comic poets lead [to stage], those [who] do not [even] approach the things measured and necessary with respect to pleasures" (τὰ μέτρια καὶ τὰ ἀναγκαῖα πλησιάζουσι τοῖς ἡδέσιν: 1230b18–20). Here, one imagines a gruff farmer from outside the city, a dour character who takes little pleasure in anything, let alone food, drink, and sex. *EN* III.11, however, offers a different assessment: "If [to] someone nothing is pleasant, nor different from anything else, he would be far from being human" (πόρρω . . . τοῦ ἀνθρώπου εἶναι: 1119a9–10). Insensibility is simply "not human" (οὐ . . . ἀνθρωπικῇ: 1119a6–7).

Like the intemperate agent, the insensible agent also forgets his own nature. If to occupy a position *below* humanity is to be a beast, then to occupy one *above* humanity is to be a god. The insensible person reveals his ignorance of his place in the *scala naturae*, as well as proper ordering of his soul, by undervaluing the satisfaction of such appetites. Crudely put, the insensible agent errs in living (or aspiring to live) somehow like a god, as the crow flies. Gods, after all, are not subject to *epithumiai* (hence, the virtue of temperance simply fails to apply to them: *EN* X.8, 1178b15–16). Such a view recalls Socrates' remarks on the life contrary to the life of pleasure in the *Philebus*. One who lives this unmixed life of *nous* – a life maximally given over to thought, but making no place for pleasure of any sort – will be "living in total insensitivity" (ἀπαθής: 21e12). Yet at the same time, Socrates thinks that this life would also be, in a certain peculiar sense, "the most godlike" (θειότατος: 33b7).⁷ In his account of insensibility, Aristotle again follows Socrates' lead.

Aristotle says little about insensibility. Yet this vice, like intemperance, harms the agent in two directions. On the one hand, when one fails to enjoy satisfying one's bodily *epithumiai*, one fails to actualize a potential aspect of one's rational nature, viz., the nonrational element that listens to

⁷ Verity Harte reminded me of this point.

and obeys reason. On the other hand, when one fails to satisfy one's common and special *epithumiai*, one will pursue, at best, only the minimal nourishment and sex required for basic survival. True, this bare minimum might suffice for meeting one's most basic needs. It might prevent one from simply falling over dead. Yet this minimum is ill-suited to the health and good bodily condition beneficial for contemplating well in a complete life. When the insensible agent obtains only what is necessary for *bare subsistence*, his threptic security will be relatively precarious. But as Aristotle insists elsewhere, extra resources are better than bare necessities (*Topics* III.2, 118a6ff). The insensible person, then, might satisfy his threptic needs to the minimal degree. Insufficiently moved by bodily pleasures, however, he fails to meet these needs securely and robustly. Thus, the insensible agent's vice ultimately affects his higher-level rational and contemplative activity as well. In insensible people, *epithumia* fails adequately to guide those threptic functions that subserve reasoning and contemplation, and which need to function well if human beings are to persist as active reasoners and contemplators.

The temperate agent, in contrast to both the intemperate and the insensible agents, knows himself. He recognizes his similarities to the divine: he correctly understands his nature and the proper ordering of his soul around contemplative *nous*. At the same time, he recognizes that he is not a god, but rather, a mortal being whose contemplation requires threptic and perceptive activity. Hence, he recognizes that his *epithumiai*, although shared with other animals, are "no less human" than his contemplative functions (*EN* III.1, 1111b1). He is aware that completely exercising his contemplative powers requires him to exercise his perceptive and threptic functions in a more-than-minimal fashion. Hence, the temperate agent exercises these powers not only in meeting his basic subsistence needs, but in temperately satisfying his special appetites as pleasant in themselves. Recognizing that he is not a beast, and understanding that "enjoying [bodily pleasures] and loving them *most of all* [is] bestial" (θηριώδεις: III.10, 1118b3–4; my emphasis), the temperate agent pursues such pleasures in a measured way.⁸

Neither the *Nicomachean* nor the *Eudemian Ethics* explicitly mentions self-awareness (or self-knowledge) in relation to temperance. Yet *Rhetoric* II.12 points out how intemperance implies a certain self-ignorance.

⁸ Young does not discuss the role that contemplation might play in generating self-knowledge. Yet he rightly emphasizes the temperate agent's self-knowledge: "To have Aristotelian temperance . . . is to embody the recognition that one is animal in genus and rational in species. It is to know one's place in the community of souls" (1988: 542). Cf. White (1992: 187) and Long (1999: 122).

Consider Aristotle's portrait of the intemperate young, who love, hate, and enjoy bodily pleasures to unmeasured extremes: "And in everything they miss the mark in excess and vehemence, contrary to the maxim of Chilon (for they do everything 'too much': for they love too much and they hate too much and all the other things similarly)" (1389b2–5; cf. *EN* III.11, 1118b10–11). The "maxim of Chilon" to which Aristotle alludes is "μηδὲν ἄγαν" – "nothing in excess" – the second command inscribed at the Delphic temple.⁹ But Aristotle's explanation for why the young go to excess is illuminating: "[T]hey think [themselves] to know everything (εἰδέναι ἅπαντα) and they affirm [this] confidently (for this is cause also of all things 'too much' (πάντα ἄγαν))" (1389b5–7). Young people go to excess – and show *hubris* (1389b7) – owing to a certain ignorance, despite what they think themselves to know. Alluding to the traditional link between the Delphic maxims "nothing too much" and "know thyself" (γνῶθι σαυτὸν), Aristotle suggests that the young are ignorant *of themselves*.¹⁰ Aristotle, then, links obeying the Delphic inscription, knowing oneself, and being temperate. In doing so, he follows not only Plato, but the popular Greek tradition as well.¹¹

9.3 Courage

Temperance most clearly displays general patterns visible in other Aristotelian ethical virtues. I now turn to another fundamental Aristotelian virtue, courage (ἀνδρεία: *EN* III.6–9), which concerns "the frightening" (τὰ φοβερά: III.6, 1115a8). More specifically, courage concerns our responses to (1) fear and (2) daring (1115a6–7), paradigmatically in the circumstances of battle, when we face death (1115a30–35). So understood, courage is an intermediacy between (1) too much fear and too little fear and (2) too much daring and too little daring. The rash person has excessive daring, just as his close relative, the unnamed vicious person, has deficient fear. Aristotle, in other words, distinguishes the rash person who rushes into battle with excessive daring from the (rare) unnamed person with deficient fear. Both such figures, however, differ from the coward, who has *both* excessive fear *and* deficient daring.

⁹ On how the temperate obey the μηδὲν ἄγαν, cf. Plato, *Philebus* 45d–e.

¹⁰ Aristotle discusses these maxims together (in offering advice to the orator) at *Rhetoric* II.21, 1395a21–24. In Plato, Socrates describes the popularity of the two maxims at *Protagoras* 343b, which are mentioned a few pages apart in the *Philebus* (at 45d–e and 48c). See also the (possibly spurious) *Hipparchus* 228e.

¹¹ See, e.g., Plato, *Charmides* 164e–165a and the (possibly spurious) *Rival Lovers* 138a. On the popular tradition, see Wilkins (1917); North (1966) and (1979: ch. 1).

In Section 6.2, I identified *thumos* as a rousing concern for oneself or one's own in the face of offenses, obstacles, or difficulties. Recall that fear is "in the thumotic element" (*Topics* IV.5, 126a8–10). The same presumably holds for fear's inverse. Fear and daring, then, are two forms that such *thumos* can take: fear impels one to flee difficulties, whereas daring impels one to confront them. The natural courage that some animals display manifests this *thumos* most explicitly (*EN* III.8, 1116b25; 1117a2–9). While *thumos* conduces to our acting courageously (1116b30–31), courage is irreducible to this passion. Instead, the ethical *virtue* of courage is a state that completes our thumotic powers for fear and daring, so that we feel fear and daring *well*. The virtue of courage disposes us to withstand fear and to show daring appropriately, acting with correct reason and for the sake of the fine. Courageous action is not a simple lashing out at potential threats (1117a4–5).

The courageous agent, then, will fear the relevant dangers, but will endure them appropriately (*EN* III.7, 1115b17–20). What boundary markers, however, define excess and deficiency in fear and daring? Answers to these questions suggest themselves when we consider the nature of *thumos*. This passion rouses us to act in the face of dangers: it serves us in protecting ourselves, and our interests, insofar as we are animals. *Thumos* has a place in our lives as mortals that it lacks in the lives of immortal gods. The same, then, holds for courage (*EN* X.8, 1178b12–13).

Courageous action is bounded, on the one hand, by certain kinds of fearsome possibilities that are "above humanity" (ὑπὲρ ἀνθρώπων: *EN* III.7, 1115b7–9; cf. III.1, 1110a24–26; III.7, 1115b26–28; *EE* III.1, 1229b20–21). What exceeds our powers, Aristotle's *Eudemian* account of courage clarifies, is what is "destructive of living" (ἀναιρετική τοῦ ζῆν: III.1, 1229a40–41; cf. 1229b14–15). Courage, then, is a disposition concerning *thumos* informed, in one direction, by a due sense of human limitation – an understanding informed by one's contemplating god and grasping one's *difference and separateness* from the divine. Unlike the gods, mortals can perish. A fitting response to dangerous threats grasps this essential human limitation.

On the other hand, courage is a disposition concerning *thumos* informed, from a different direction, by a due understanding of human *capacity*. Such understanding is equally informed by contemplating god and grasping relevant *likenesses and similarities* between the divine and the human. Hence, courageous action is informed by an understanding of how human nature and the human good differ from the nature and good of merely perceptive, nonhuman animals. It is worth it *for us* to risk our lives

to preserve some goods, most significantly, the political conditions under which we can fully exercise the human function in its practically rational and – especially – contemplative aspects.

When the courageous person faces a serious danger that nevertheless lies within his powers to confront and overcome, then, he is undaunted. But he is “undaunted as a human being” (ἀνέκπληκτος ὡς ἄνθρωπος: *EN* III.7, 1115b9–11). Unlike his vicious counterparts, the courageous person adequately grasps how he stands in relation to the superhuman and the bestial.

So described, the courageous person differs from both deficiently and excessively fearful people. The deficiently fearful person, like the insensible person, is deficiently responsive to the objects of nonrational desire – in this case, to the object of fearful desires to flee (viz., safety). Feeling these desires insufficiently, he appears “mad or unfeeling” (μαινόμενος ἢ ἀνάλγητος: 1115b26). This character shows himself ignorant of his nature as a mortal subject to harm and consequently in need of certain goods. Like the insensible person, the deficiently fearful person is rare, which accounts for his namelessness. The excessively fearful coward, by contrast, shows a certain kinship with the intemperate person: both types are overresponsive to the pull of nonrational desire – again, in the coward’s case, *thumos qua* fear. The excessively fearful coward displays a different ignorance of his nature and his good. *Qua* excessively fearful, he aims for safety even when he can reasonably stand up against and overcome a threat. The coward *qua* excessively fearful grants excessive authority to fearful desires to flee, and consequently behaves in an overly animalistic, desire-dominated way. He thereby neglects his authoritative rational powers and forgets their proper role within his life.

Likewise, the courageous person differs from both the rash person and the deficiently confident coward. Overresponsive to his daring impulses, the rash person rushes into dangerous situations that overstrain his powers. His rashness thus mirrors animal analogues of courage: it leads him to charge into dangerous situations without assessing their danger. The deficiently daring coward, by contrast, responds insufficiently to a certain beneficial kind of nonrational desire. Such a coward, insufficiently stirred to protect his own interests, fails to stand up against mortal threats. He thereby ignores his human finitude and his need, as a mortal, to confront such threats when he can do so. In ways that [Chapter 6](#) outlined, such a coward thereby impairs his threptic prospects – and, by extension, his prospects for contemplation in a complete life.

Aristotle’s remarks on courage, however, generate a puzzle. The courageous person, as Aristotle describes him, stands strong in the face of

certain dangers. He risks life and limb. Yet happiness consists in activity of soul – *living* – according to the best and most complete virtue. Indeed, happiness consists in such activity in a *complete life*. Hence, when the courageous person takes on such serious risks, how does he exercise *phronêsis*, choose well, and act for the sake of his happiness? The courageous person's choice seems to conflict with his happiness. Simply by taking up arms against threats, it might seem, the courageous person gives insufficient weight to his basic threptic needs, without which any contemplation is impossible. Perhaps courage, like murder and adultery, is always excessive; and perhaps being a "prudent coward" would be the wisest choice of all.¹²

My account of Aristotle on courage, however, suggests how Aristotle can respond to such worries. The courageous person is not a beast; yet nor is he a god. The courageous person *qua* courageous confronts and withstands real, but not *impossibly formidable*, threats to his agency. In standing up against such threats, he benefits, both in actualizing his agency well and by preserving it. For he has the best chance of neutralizing these threats to his agency, which requires a political backdrop to be exercised completely. The benefits of courage for human self-maintenance are clearer, as Rosalind Hursthouse suggests, when we consider animal analogues of courage. Wolves that display animal courage, for instance, foster the survival of their packs, a survival that reciprocally conduces to the preservation of such packs' individual members.¹³

On the account I attribute to Aristotle, acting courageously – neither withdrawing in the face of any old danger, no matter how slight the risk, nor impetuously rushing into dangers that exceed one's powers – is a practically wise response to threats one faces as a mortal rational animal. The paradigmatic situations that require me to exercise courage are ones in which my city and way of life are in peril, e.g., scenarios in which I face enslavement or death at the hands of an enemy. Such evils reliably preclude my happiness, and reliably threaten my active contemplation. Hence, I have good reason to defend myself against these evils.¹⁴

¹² I borrow the term "prudent coward" from Irwin (1988: 383–384).

¹³ Hursthouse (1999: 208–209).

¹⁴ In a helpful discussion of how the demands of courage are compatible with happiness, Balot (2014: 325) argues that courage and *eudaimonia* stand in tension only "if we are obsessively focused on the continuation of life as a biological function." My interpretation of Aristotle, of course, highlights the neglected role of threptic activity in the human good. Yet threptic activity – as my account has also emphasized – properly subserves perception, practical reason, and contemplation.

In standing up against threats, the courageous person takes on risks and confronts danger. Yet the courageous person's decision is not tantamount to *choosing to die*.¹⁵ On the contrary, he takes on risks only when there is some chance that his actions *can* make a difference in affecting the outcome. When one's destruction is overwhelmingly likely or assured, taking on risks is either deficiently fearless or excessively confident. And when risks are worth taking, the courageous person goes to battle while taking all proper means to make it out alive.¹⁶ In short, in taking on risks for the sake of happiness (as opposed to avoiding all risks or rushing into assured destruction), the courageous person chooses wisely, with an understanding of his nature and his good – including its threptic preconditions.

Suppose that the courageous person takes on such risks, and successfully wards off such threats. In this case, he benefits without qualification, for he successfully defends his happiness. Suppose, however, that the courageous person takes on such risks, but fares badly and dies in battle. Even in this case, he also benefits – albeit with qualification. For he performs the action that, under the circumstances, and for reasons already noted, is most conducive to his happiness. He chooses rightly and acts virtuously. But his luck is bad. Hence, his happiness is incomplete, for his life proves incomplete.¹⁷

9.4 Liberality and Proper Ambition

Having explored temperance and courage, we are in a position to understand the other Aristotelian ethical virtues, which prove to be structurally analogous. Liberality (ἐλευθεριότης: *EN* IV.1), for instance, concerns passions toward wealth as such. Per Aristotle, liberality lies between wastefulness (the excess) and stinginess (the deficiency) (*EN* IV.1, 1119b27–28). The virtue concerns different uses of wealth: (1) acquisition and (2) expenditure and giving. In *acquisition*, the relevant vices include stinginess (excessiveness in taking) and wastefulness (deficiency in taking). In *expenditure and giving*, however, wastefulness constitutes an excess and stinginess a deficiency (1121a10–15).

Aristotle also identifies another, unnamed virtue concerned with small, or ordinary, honors (*EN* IV.4). This virtue constitutes a mean between an excessive love of honor and a deficient indifference to honor. Hence,

¹⁵ See, especially, Halper (1993: 64–66) and Rogers (1994: 310). Related issues face Aristotle's views on self-love and self-sacrifice in *EN* IX.8. See, e.g., Stern-Gillet (1995: 107–115).

¹⁶ See White (1992: 274). ¹⁷ Following Pearson (2014: 122–123).

Aristotle identifies the virtue concerned with small honors as a kind of proper ambition (1125b8–14). Aristotle explicitly compares this virtue to liberality: just as one can acquire and give money more and less than one should, one can seek honor more than one should (1125b1–8). Hence, I consider these virtues as a pair.

Aristotle does not highlight the precise passions that liberality and proper ambition address. But as argued in [Section 6.1](#), Aristotle identifies wealth and honor (as such) as objects of *epithumia*. Therefore, one may reasonably identify these passions as *epithumiai* for small-scale wealth and honor, respectively, i.e., *epithumiai* for wealth and honor in everyday, ordinary contexts. (I consider the passions that concern great wealth and honor in [Section 9.5](#).) The stingy person with excessive desires to acquire wealth, like the excessive honor-lover, indulges *epithumia* for external goods as such and takes excessive pleasure in accumulation. Like the intemperate, such figures are excessively receptive to *epithumiai*. They satisfy nonrational appetites at the expense of their overall good – not only at the expense of exercising their rational capacities, but also at the expense of acquiring and using other goods that provide threptic security. By contrast, the wasteful person insufficiently disposed to acquire wealth, like the honor-indifferent person, invites comparison with the insensible person. Such types overlook the real value of wealth and honor in the lives of mortal political animals, just as the insensible person overlooks the real value of food, drink, and sex. For a human being, Aristotle says, “living is through” wealth (τοῦ ζῆν διὰ τούτων ὄντος: *EN* IV.1, 1120a3). Likewise, human beings best meet their basic threptic needs in political communities, where honor provides advantages and security. (Unlike wealth, honor cannot be spent. Hence, proper ambition is akin to liberality and temperance insofar as those latter virtues concern desires for acquiring certain items, viz., wealth, food, drink, and sex.)

The person wasteful in spending and giving also misunderstands his human nature. Wasteful people, Aristotle says, are prone to intemperate desires for food, drink, and sex. Wasteful people thus spend too much on the means to satisfy these desires (*EN* IV.1, 1119b27–32; 1121b7–10).¹⁸ Like the intemperate person who eats too much, the

¹⁸ On the internal links between temperance and liberality, see Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, 212 and Irwin (1988: 442–443, 631n6). For a different approach to liberality, see Curzer (2012: 84–87), who identifies it as a “desire and disposition to benefit others” (86). The liberal person’s desire to benefit others, I suggest, displays his proper state concerning *epithumia* for wealth.

wasteful person who spends too much, for the sake of bodily pleasures, harms himself. Excessively responsive to *epithumiai*, he overlooks the value of wealth in obtaining *other* goods that he needs to live well as a rational animal, and in securing his threptic prospects for the sake of contemplation.

Wealth, and with it, liberality, have places in human life that they lack in the lives of gods. Thus, Aristotle finds equally absurd the prospect of gods exercising liberality by giving to other, equally self-sufficient gods (*EN* X.8, 1178b13–15). Given wealth's role in maintaining human life, the wasteful person's vices are *self*-destructive: "For one utterly destructive on account of himself is wasteful, and the ruining of property also seems to be a certain destruction of oneself" (ἄσωτος γὰρ ὁ δι' αὐτὸν ἀπολλύμενος, δοκεῖ δ' ἀπώλειά τις αὐτοῦ εἶναι καὶ ἡ τῆς οὐσίας φθορά: *EN* IV.1, 1120a1–2). For Aristotle, to ruin one's *property* – one's οὐσία – promises to destroy one's very *substance*. Besides destroying the resources (directly) conducive to freeing him to contemplate, the wasteful person destroys the material resources by which he can meet his threptic needs and persist actively as a contemplator.

Meanwhile, the stingy person deficiently disposed to spend, like the insensible person, is deficiently disposed to *epithumiai* – especially for food, drink, and sex. Insufficiently motivated to spend in relation to these goods, the stingy person hoards money and lives a crimped, anhedonic existence. In this way, the stingy person's stance toward spending displays his obliviousness to the value of the various goods that provide threptic security and benefit him as a mortal. Hence, his stance displays his obliviousness to his mortal limitations and needs.

9.5 The Grand-Scale Virtues: Magnificence and Magnanimity

Magnificence and magnanimity, Aristotle's grand-scale virtues concerning wealth and honor, likewise invite comparison as a pair. I first examine magnificence (μεγαλοπρέπεια: *EN* IV.2), which Aristotle describes as a kind of large-scale liberality (1122b12–14). Unlike liberality, magnificence does not address passions concerning wealth and expenditure as such. Instead, magnificence addresses passions concerning *great* wealth and expenditures, especially those having to do with the gods and "daimonic" matters (1122b19–21; 1123a9–10), in competitive public benefactions (1122b21–25). Such expenses, Aristotle notes, conduce to one's honor and promote the common good (1122b32–33; 1123a4–5). Magnificence, so understood, is an intermediacy between vulgarity

(an excessive disposition to spend without restraint on a grand scale) and shabbiness (a deficient disposition to spend too little in such matters, at least when one can).¹⁹

How, then, does grand-scale magnificence relate to small-scale liberality? My proposal: magnificence addresses a different *kind* of desire for wealth. Again, magnificence concerns one's desires for *great* wealth, the expenditure of which confronts one with certain obstacles and risks. Magnificence, then, concerns *thumotic desires* with respect to great expenditures. To defend this view, I consider Aristotle's remarks on magnificence in special relation to his remarks on courage, another virtue concerned with one's thumotic desires and the common good. The small-scale virtue of liberality is structurally analogous to temperance insofar as liberality concerns a kind of *epithumia*. Similarly, the grand-scale virtue of magnificence is structurally analogous to courage insofar as magnificence, like courage, concerns a kind of *thumos*.

Recall the rash person who rushes into battle. Impelled by *thumos*, this figure takes on needless risks that lie beyond his powers. He acts not for the sake of the fine, but, rather, simply to show off: he "seems to be both boasting and making a pretense to courage" (δοκεῖ δὲ καὶ ἀλαζών εἶναι ὁ θρασὺς καὶ προσποιητικὸς ἀνδρείας: *EN* III.7, 1115b29–30). Likewise, impelled by *thumos* and similarly motivated, the vulgar person rushes into great expenditure on behalf of his community. He takes on needless economic risks, throwing his money away on flashy schemes, "showing off wealth, and, on account of these things, thinking he will be wondrous" (τὸν πλοῦτον ἐπιδεικνύμενος, καὶ διὰ ταῦτα οἴομενος θαυμάζεσθαι: *EN* IV.2, 1123a25–26; cf. 1122a31–33). Aristotle's account of liberality has already clarified how wasteful spending harms one. Vulgarly in *great* expenditures only exacerbates such harm.

If the vulgarity is akin to rashness in matters of great expenditure, shabbiness is akin to daring-deficient cowardice. The shabby person is insufficiently responsive to *thumos* for great expenditure, even when he is capable of such expenditure and even when the community in which he would flourish would benefit from it. Thus, he trembles at great expenditure, "hesitating and examining how to spend the least, and bemoaning this"

¹⁹ For Aristotle, magnificence concerns great expense. As Aristotle describes it, however, being magnificent seems to presuppose having a certain class position (*EN* IV.2, 1122b29–32). As Aristotle observes, the poor are unable to be magnificent (1122b26–29). But what if I lack lots of money? Must I therefore lack this virtue – and, hence, complete virtue as such (insofar Aristotle accepts the reciprocity of the virtues)? Gottlieb (2009: 215–218) helpfully surveys multiple recent responses to these worries.

(καὶ ὁ τι ἂν ποιῇ μέλλων καὶ σκοπῶν πῶς ἂν ἐλάχιστον ἀναλώσαι, καὶ ταῦτ' ὀδυρόμενος: 1123a29–30). As in cowardice, so too in shabbiness, the failure to stand up for and aid one's own – in this case, one's own community – indirectly impairs one's threptic security by failing, when fitting, to benefit the community in which one can live and live well.

Unlike both such figures, the magnificent person spends great amounts well, benefiting his community. Understanding the value of great wealth for mortals like himself, he avoids the vulgar waste of great sums. Conversely, understanding the value of great wealth in honoring the divine and in guiding other civic functions within his community, in which he thrives as a contemplative political animal, he avoids shabbiness. Understanding himself as neither beast nor god, and appreciating the role of civic expenditures for the higher and lower ends of human life, he spends great sums fittingly and with taste.

When the magnificent person spends greatly, he grasps the value of different ends within human life. The magnificent person “seems like one understanding scientifically; for he is able to contemplate the fitting, and to spend large amounts decorously” (ὁ δὲ μεγαλοπρεπῆς ἐπιστήμονι ἔοικεν· τὸ πρέπον γὰρ δύναται θεωρῆσαι καὶ δαπανῆσαι μεγάλα ἐμμελῶς: IV.2, 1122a34–35). To be sure, the magnificent person possesses *phronêsis*, the virtue of the *logistikon*. But Aristotle's explicit emphasis on the magnificent person's *epistêmê* and *theôria* suggests that the magnificent person has a deeper grasp of human nature and the human good. This deeper understanding serves as a salience detector when the magnificent person considers his community's needs.

Magnanimity (μεγαλοψυχία: IV.3) – greatness of soul – is a related grand-scale virtue. As described by Aristotle, this virtue lies in a mean between vanity and pusillanimity (1123b8–13). It concerns our desire not for honor as such, but for great honors and our sense of our worthiness to receive such honors. The magnanimous person possesses a due sense of the value of great honor, a good bestowed upon the gods (1123b18) and so the greatest of externally conferred goods (1123b20–21).

Just as proper ambition concerns *epithumia* toward honor as such, magnanimity concerns *thumos* for great honor. Like magnificence, then, magnanimity is structurally analogous to courage. The vain person is like *both* the rash person in the domain of battle *and* the vulgar person in the domain of great expenditure. Like such agents, who rush into situations that lie beyond their capacities, vain people seem foolish and lacking self-knowledge (ἐαυτοὺς ἀγνοοῦντες: 1125a28) – in particular, about their abilities and limitations. “For not being worthy, they attempt what is

honored, then are found out” (οὐ γὰρ ἄξιοι ὄντες τοῖς ἐντίμοις ἐπιχειροῦσιν, εἴτα ἐξελέγχονται: 1125a28–29). Accordingly, they rush into ventures and seek offices that promise great honor, but at which they are apt to fail – especially ventures and offices aimed at the common good. In these ways, the vain invite dangers upon themselves, which threaten, directly and indirectly, their threptic prospects and possibilities for contemplation.

The pusillanimous, or small-souled, by contrast, are like daring-deficient cowards. They seem “more fearful” (μᾶλλον ὀκνηροί) than foolish (1125a23–24). Like cowards on the battlefield, the pusillanimous “hold off” (ἀφίστανται) from fine deeds and the greatest of external goods (1125a25–27). And like the vain, the pusillanimous are “self-ignorant” (ἀγνοεῖν δ’ ἑαυτόν: 1125a22). Insufficiently responsive to *thumos* for great honor, and failing to claim great honors within their capacities of achievement, they are insufficiently responsive to the value of great honor within a human life, the life of a *mortal* political animal.

Qua magnanimous, then, one displays neither an unduly low, *thumos*-deficient, nor an inflated, *thumos*-excessive, sense of one’s own worthiness. Like the courageous person and the magnificent person, the magnanimous person rejects an emphasis on outward show (contrast 1124b26–31 and 1125a6–7 with 1125a30–32). Further, the magnanimous person knows himself. Possessing the other ethical virtues, the magnanimous person grasps his worthiness for great honor (1123b14–15) in light of his deeper understanding of great honor’s value for mortals, and within a perspective that grasps the limitations of the human relative to the divine.²⁰

9.6 The Social Virtues: Good Temper, Friendliness, Truthfulness, Wittiness

My account of the various social virtues will be brief.

(1) Like courage, good temper (πρότης: *EN* IV.5) reveals an appropriate spirited response to a certain class of obstacles and threats – viz., slights – that generate anger and desires for retaliation. As noted in [Section 6.2](#), Aristotle highlights anger as a kind of *thumos*. The good-tempered person, then, is neither excessively nor deficiently responsive to such *thumos*. “Unperturbed and not led by passion” (ἀτάραχος εἶναι καὶ μὴ ἄγεσθαι ὑπὸ τοῦ πάθους: 1125b34–35), the good-tempered person does not charge

²⁰ Magnanimity is among the more controversial virtues on Aristotle’s table. For able defenses of it, see Curzer (1991), and, in conjunction with magnificence, Gottlieb (2009: 215–218).

into interpersonal conflict. Nor does he display a godlike imperturbability and avoid such conflict. Instead, the good-tempered person, properly receptive to anger, confronts conflict when necessary: he asserts himself, and his interests as a political animal within a community, in the face of slights.

(2) Friendliness (φιλία: *EN* IV.6; cf. II.7, 1108a28) is a disposition to enjoy the company of other people neither excessively nor deficiently. The obsequious person, who takes excessive pleasure in such interaction, enjoys the pleasures of such interaction, even at his own expense. This stance puts him in a camp with other *epithumia*-excessive vicious people, such as the intemperate, the wasteful, and the excessive honor-lover. Indeed, Aristotle explicitly links obsequiousness with intemperance: the intemperate person, Aristotle holds, tends toward obsequiousness as he seeks others who will satisfy his other *epithumiai* (*EN* IV.1, 1121b6–7; cf. IV.6, 1127a8–10).²¹ The obsequious person indulges his nonrational desires, but in doing so without restraint, he suffers. For he enjoys the pleasures of social interaction even at the cost of his honor and good reputation (1126b30–35), goods that provide security for mortals. Conversely, the surly person is deficiently disposed toward such convivial desires. Disagreeable and cantankerous, he does not mind offensively paining others (cf. 1126b28–30). He thereby shows an ignorance of the value of such pleasures in the life of a political animal, a value that they lack for solitary, self-sufficient gods.

(3) Truthfulness (ἀλήθεια: *EN* IV.7; cf. II.7, 1108a20) concerns *epithumia* for the pleasures of a good reputation. So construed, truthfulness invites comparison with proper ambition, which, I have argued, concerns *epithumia* for the pleasures of honor. Hence, the truthful person recognizes the value of a good reputation for mortal, political animals. He appropriately desires such a reputation (and the pleasures attendant on its possession). He thus differs from the boaster excessively prone to nonrational desires for a good reputation. Likewise, he differs from the self-deprecator deficiently prone to such nonrational desires. Insufficiently receptive to reputation's value for mortals, the self-deprecator displays ignorance of his lack of divine self-sufficiency.²²

²¹ Irwin (1988: 384).

²² Contrary to Bostock (2000: 49–50), who denies that any emotion is specially associated with truthfulness.

(4) Wittiness (εὐτραπελία: *EN* IV.8) invites close comparison with temperance. Just as the intemperate person is excessively disposed to *epithumiai* for the pleasures of food, drink, and sex, the buffoon desires the pleasures of laughter to excess (*EE* III.7, 1234a5–8). Just as the insensible person responds insufficiently to the necessary pleasures of food, drink, and sex (cf. *EN* VII.4, 1147b23–28), so too the boor (or the stiff) responds insufficiently to such pleasures of recreation. For human beings, unlike gods, these pleasures are, in their way, “necessary” to life (*EN* IV.8, 1128b3–4).²³

9.7 Justice

Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of justice (δικαιοσύνη: *EN* V.1–2). The first, *general justice*, is linked with lawfulness, for the law commands what is (generally) just. General justice is complete virtue – *toward others*, not just oneself (*EN* V.1, 1129b31–33). *Qua* generally just, in other words, one acts courageously and temperately, but in relation to others. One does not harm others through acts of cowardice or intemperance (1129b19–25; cf. *Rhetoric* II.4, 1381a23–24). Hence, my remarks on those virtues apply to general justice as well.²⁴

Special justice, by contrast, is one part of virtue as a whole (*EN* V.2, 1130a15–16) concerned with the distribution of honors and wealth. People unjust in this sense overreach for more of these external goods than they deserve (1130a17, 20). Elsewhere, Aristotle identifies such people as those who take more than they deserve of the finite stock of limited goods, as a way of gratifying their *epithumiai* (*EN* IX.8, 1168b19–21). Special justice, in short, addresses a certain *epithumia* for what Aristotle calls “the pleasure from gain” (δὲ ἡδονὴν τὴν ἀπὸ τοῦ κέρδους: *EN* V.2, 1130b4). The virtue is an intermediacy between *pleonexia* (an excessive receptivity to desires for gaining more limited-supply external goods than one deserves) and an unnamed vice (a deficient receptivity to desires for gaining as much of these goods as one deserves).²⁵

²³ At *EE* III.2, 1230b18–20 (discussed in [Section 9.1](#)), Aristotle specifies the insensible agent by reference to the rustic boors in comedy. I fully elaborate and defend this account of wittiness, and spell out its relation to temperance, in Walker ([forthcoming](#)).

²⁴ My comments assume the traditional reading that identifies general justice as a virtue that individual people can possess. Fossheim (2011) argues, however, that general justice is a virtue, not of individual people, but rather of communities. If the traditional reading is wrong, then individuals might not need a *horos* to guide them toward generally just action (though legislators might).

²⁵ Curzer (2012: 231–233) calls the vice of deficiency *meionexia*. On *pleonexia* as a response to human insecurity in the face of mortality, see the interesting remarks in T.W. Smith (2001: 136–141). Aubenque (1963: 160) notes the traditional Greek linkage between *pleonexia* and *hubris*.

Aristotle defines special justice somewhat oddly as an intermediacy between doing and suffering injustice (*EN* V.5, 1133b30–33). My initial sketch of special justice, however, makes sense of this claim. Impelled by nonrational *epithumiai* for gain, pleonectics excessively desire the deserved, limited-supply goods of other people. In skipping out on debts and in violating the terms of contracts, the pleonectic grabs for more than his fair share, and seeks to get the better of others.²⁶

Conversely, those with the unnamed vice of deficiency figuratively roll over when others grab for their own deserved goods. Taking insufficient pleasure in possessing their fair share, they let others take advantage of them. Thus, they suffer injustice. But such goods, and the practices involved with securing them, have a special place and value in the lives of mortals. Aristotle highlights the absurdity of gods making contracts, paying off debts, and the like (*EN* X.8, 1178b10–12). Hence, those with the unnamed vice of deficiency display an insufficient grasp of the value of such goods for human beings. (Since *pleonexia* – “overreaching” or “graspingness” or “greed” – is, alas, more common than the unnamed vice of deficiency, Aristotle has little to say about the latter.)

The specially just person recognizes that such goods benefit him as a finite, mortal being suited to life in a community. He avoids letting others commit injustice against him. At the same time, the specially just person is free from *pleonexia*. He engages with, and obtains benefits from, other people through conversation and peaceful exchange. Grasping his nature and good as bounded by the divine and the bestial, the specially just person appropriately desires, and takes pleasure in, his deserved share of external goods.²⁷

9.8 Beastliness and Heroic Virtue

My main proposal in this chapter – viz., that the ethical virtues are states definable by reference to human powers and limitations in relation to the divine and bestial – finds further support from *EN* VII.1 and VII.5. After identifying *sophia* as the best and most complete virtue in *EN* VI.13, Aristotle makes a “new start” in Book VII by examining what he calls (1)

²⁶ Such *pleonexia* displays a merely animal outlook most apparent in beastliness: “For just as, when perfected, the human being is best of the animals, so too, when separated from law and justice, [he is] worst of all” (ὥσπερ γὰρ καὶ τελεωθεὶς βέλτιστον τῶν ζώων ἄνθρωπός ἐστιν, οὕτω καὶ χωρισθεὶς νόμου καὶ δίκης χείριστον πάντων: *Politics* I.2, 1253a31–33).

²⁷ So understood, special justice is an intermediacy, as Long (1999: 124) puts it, “between subhuman aggression and superhuman pacifism.”

beastliness (θηριότης)²⁸ and (2) a “certain heroic and divine” (ἡρωικὴν τινα καὶ θεῖαν) virtue. He distinguishes such vice and virtue from ordinary, or human, vice and virtue.

As Aristotle describes it, beastliness at once differs in kind from ethical, or human, vice, yet intensifies its key tendencies. Beastliness differs in kind because human vice is a state affecting an agent capable of practical and theoretical reasoning. In human vice, these powers malfunction. Vices of excess preclude reason from guiding action. In one possessing vices of excess, reason instead remains subservient to nonrational desire and pursues its objects without discrimination. Among the bestial, by contrast, rational powers are either altogether destroyed or at least severely impaired. Unlike vice “according to humanity” (κατ’ ἀνθρώπων: VII.5, 1149a16), beastliness is a diseased condition (1148b25; b29–34; 1149a11–12; a18–19). Hence, beastliness lies “outside the boundary markers of vice” (ἔξω τῶν ὁρίων ἐστὶ τῆς κακίας: 1148b34–1149a1). At the same time, beastliness shows, in a more extreme way, tendencies at play in ordinary, human vice (1149a4–6). The bestial, deprived of reason, “live only by perception” (μόνον τῇ αἰσθήσει ζῶντες: 1149a9–10). Indeed, beastliness displays an utter obliviousness to the human being’s political nature: Aristotle’s ghastly examples of beastliness emphasize cannibalism and child-eating (1148b19–24; b25–27; 1149a14–15). The bestial – bereft of reason, and governed wholly by a corrupted form of nonrational desire – occupy a radically pre-familial and pre-political condition. They encounter other human beings, including their own offspring, not as fellow members of families or communities, but simply as material resources to be devoured and digested. While Aristotle’s examples of beastliness provoke disgust, they also disclose, forcefully, the lower limits of human nature and the human good. For Aristotle, beastliness explicitly defines the “boundary markers of vice” for human beings, at least where excess is concerned.

Aristotle’s remarks on heroic virtue inevitably raise questions about parts of my account. On my account, the quasi-bestial dimensions of human vices of excess are matched by the quasi-divine, or at least mortality-denying, dimensions of human vices of deficiency. Aristotle, however, explicitly identifies beastliness’s contrary as heroic virtue, a divine kind of virtue “above us” (ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς) (VII.1, 1145a18–20). Perhaps, then, divinity does not define the upper boundary markers of the human good. So, does my account go wrong in suggesting that it does?

²⁸ On behalf of this translation, see Cooper (2009: 111n4).

In response, Aristotle says little about heroic virtue. Such virtue is rare (1145a27–28), and Aristotle posits such virtue primarily on the grounds that beastliness requires a contrary state (1145a17–18).²⁹ But what Aristotle does say about such virtue coheres with what I have said so far. Given Aristotle's examples – the sort of virtue that Priam attributes to Hector and that the Spartans attribute to those they honor – Aristotle apparently identifies heroic virtue as surpassingly excellent, or hyperbolic, ethical virtue (1145a24). In its special degree of completeness *as* ethical virtue, such heroic virtue shows a degree of unimpeded activity that approximates divine activity. Human beings, at least figuratively, “become gods” (γίνονται θεοί: 1145a23) through exercising such virtue.

Consistent with the main points of my account, however, Aristotle is not saying that we literally become gods through exercising heroic virtue. For Aristotle also explicitly *denies* that gods possess such virtue: “there is neither vice nor virtue of a beast; thus neither [is there vice nor virtue] of a god; but [a divine state] is more honorable than virtue, and [a bestial state] a certain kind different from vice” (γὰρ ὥσπερ οὐδὲ θηρίου ἐστὶ κακία οὐδ' ἀρετή, οὕτως οὐδὲ θεοῦ, ἀλλ' ἢ μὲν τιμώτερον ἀρετῆς, ἢ δ' ἕτερόν τι γένος κακίας: 1145a25–27). Through heroic virtue, we show certain glimmers of divinity – perhaps to an especially high degree. But we still remain within the boundaries of the human. To aspire to transcend these boundaries directly is to try, mistakenly, to be what we cannot be.

In short, Aristotle recognizes a kind of heroic, or divine, virtue as contrary to beastliness. Yet Aristotle's remarks suggest that aspiring to divinity at the expense of one's animality reveals one's obliviousness to one's nature and good as a human being. Hence, being deficiently receptive to the nonrational desires one has *qua* animal constitutes another kind of human vice that stands in polar relation to the various quasi-bestial, but still ordinary, human vices of excess.

9.9 Is This Account Overly Systematized?

In [Chapter 6](#), I took pains to establish the groundwork for the systematic reading of Aristotelian virtue that I have just offered. Indeed, I believe that my approach puts Aristotle's table of the ethical virtues in the best light. For my approach reveals the principles that unify Aristotle's remarks on these virtues, and it provides grounds for identifying these virtues as parts of the human good.

²⁹ See Cooper (2009: 19) on the “purely formalistic” character of Aristotle's remarks on heroic virtue.

For all that, my systematic approach is still apt to be controversial. One can deny, after all, that all ethical virtues concern passions. A first worry: Aristotle holds that virtues concern passions *and* actions (*EN* II.6, 1106b16–24; 1107a8–12). So, perhaps Aristotle thinks that actions are an independent object of concern for the virtues. A second worry: Aristotle does not always have much to say about passions when he discusses the ethical virtues. Aristotle holds that courage and temperance “seem to be the virtues of the nonrational parts” (δοκοῦσι τῶν ἀλόγων μερῶν αὐταὶ εἶναι αἱ ἀρεταί: *EN* III.10, 1117b23–24).³⁰ But perhaps Aristotle identifies only *these virtues* as concerned with passions. Perhaps, in other words, Aristotle does not identify liberality or magnificence or sundry other virtues as concerned with passions, or as differentiated by them.

In response to the first worry: I reiterate Aristotle’s explicit claims that the ethical virtues are virtues of the human soul’s reason-responsive element (*EN* I.13), as well as his insistence that the ethical virtues are states in relation to passions (*EN* II.5).³¹ The *Eudemian Ethics* also accepts these claims: ethical virtues are the states with respect to which we are disposed to certain passions (*EE* II.2, 1220b12–20; cf. II.3, 1221b9–17). Indeed, this work not only identifies the ethical virtues as the virtues of the nonrational element (*EE* II.1, 1220a5–12), but it also confirms this judgment after surveying the complete table of familiar virtues (*EE* II.4, 1221b27–34).

To be sure, Aristotle holds that virtues concern passions *and* actions. But we need to get clear about the force of the “and”: while it could be disjunctive, it is more plausibly connective. On the latter reading, ethical virtues, as states in relation to *epithumia* and *thumos*, issue forth in action. Hence, virtues also concern the actions in which these states manifest themselves. But to understand these actions, one must refer to certain passions.

In response to the second worry: yes, Aristotle has less to say about passions when he discusses virtues other than courage and temperance. But Aristotle does not identify *only* courage and temperance as concerned with passions. The virtue of friendliness, for instance, explicitly concerns anger, as do such virtue-like states as shame and righteous indignation.³² If Aristotle says less about the passions that other ethical virtues concern, he may well have special reasons to focus on the actions in which ethical virtues express themselves. Concerned, as elsewhere in his ethical works,

³⁰ Bostock (2000: 45–48) raises these worries against what he calls “the ‘standard’ account” of Aristotle on ethical virtue.

³¹ Bostock (2000: 48) concedes these points. See also D. Frede (2014: 98–99).

³² As Bostock (2000: 48) also concedes.

not to let excessive precision impede his exposition, Aristotle perhaps finds it simpler to focus on the *objects* of certain kinds of passions than on those passions themselves. He assumes that the relevant passions are in play, but does not discuss them explicitly.

Courage and temperance are *the* virtues of the nonrational element of the soul. They preeminently concern the reason-responsive element, and they provide templates for the other, structurally analogous ethical virtues. We can understand courage and temperance – and their actions – without addressing other complicating factors, such as external goods. But it does not follow that the other ethical virtues leave nonrational desires unaddressed. On the contrary, Aristotle's discussions of the ethical virtues make little sense if they do not concern such passions.³³ To the extent these virtues do have this concern, however, they have implications for the self-maintenance of rational animals.

³³ Bostock (2000: 48) is wrong, then, that Aristotle's identifying courage and temperance as "the virtues of the non-rational part" (at 1117b23–24) "surely indicates that the remaining virtues to be discussed are not virtues of this non-rational part."

Some Concluding Reflections

10.1 **Contemplating the Terrain from Above**

Here's where the story ends – narratively, if not teleologically. In the previous pages, I have explained how Aristotle's views on contemplation's place in the human good generate what I have called the utility question. On the basis of Aristotle's explicit remarks, and given Aristotle's evident concern to respond to Isocrates' challenges to contemplation's value, I take it that Aristotle *was* aware that he faced the utility question. Even if I am wrong, and Aristotle was not aware that he faced the utility question, he faces this question anyway.

Aristotle, I have shown, has resources for responding to this question. Nature does nothing in vain when it equips human beings with contemplative *nous*. Human beings are such as to *live by* contemplation in the twofold sense I have discussed throughout this book. Contemplation of the “most honorable” kind – the exercise of contemplative *nous* according to *sophia* – provides agents with an awareness of their essential powers and limitations as human beings, a form of self-awareness from which they can derive a *horos* that defines correct reason. This *horos* enables contemplators to possess *phronêsis*; and their virtuous practical reasoning, in turn, perfects their character. By indirectly regulating various kinds of *epithumia* and *thumos via* practical *nous*' mediation, contemplation indirectly guides good threptic activity. Yet the *threptikon* underlies and subserves all higher life-functions. By authoritatively guiding lower life-functions, contemplation preserves the conditions of its own exercise. Contemplation, then, conduces to contemplators' full persistence and activity as human beings. Contemplators thereby approximate the divine in a distinctively human way, live well, and attain the human good. Aristotle's remarks on contemplation's place in the human good thus cohere with his general account of the good for living organisms.

In highlighting *theôria*'s self-maintenance role, my revisionary reading of Aristotle on the uses of contemplation might initially seem unhappily reductionist, or at least bizarrely fixated on nutritive-reproductive functioning. I might seem to portray human beings as merely complicated plants and animals, and to understand higher functions in terms of lower functions. To forestall these concerns, I have highlighted the importance of thinking about higher life-functions against the backdrop of the most fundamental. More specifically, I have carefully distinguished two perspectives on the teleological relations that obtain between lower life-functions and contemplative *nous*, viz., bottom-up subserving relations and top-down guiding relations. If I were saying that all higher (contemplative) functions were for the sake of lower (threptic) ones, i.e., that contemplation subserved nutrition and perception, then the reductionist charge might hold. But by saying that contemplation merely guides threptic activity for the sake of preserving contemplation itself, we can address the utility question without committing Aristotle to the sort of reductionism present in certain contemporary neo-Darwinian views, according to which all higher functioning ultimately has lower functioning as its ultimate aim. So, to be entirely clear: on my interpretation, contemplation is for its own sake, not for the sake of reproducing selfish genes or preventing indigestion.¹

In aiming to resolve the utility question, I have argued that the *Protrepticus* is a fruitful source of insight on Aristotle's mature views on happiness. In particular, the *Protrepticus* provides us a fuller understanding of Aristotle's views on theory's relationship to practice. We can do real work by consulting the *Protrepticus*. At the same time, I have claimed, we can learn more about Aristotle's views on the human good by highlighting their Platonic dimensions. We learn more about Aristotle's views not only by appeal to such commonly read works as the *Symposium* and the *Republic*, but also by appeal to such neglected dialogues as the *Alcibiades*. By paying attention to the latter, in particular, we enhance our grasp of Aristotle's argument in the final books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and thus, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a whole.

My argument, as wide-ranging as it is, invites concerns and worries. Hence, I examine – and respond briefly – to some basic questions that my reading of Aristotle on contemplation's utility immediately raises.

¹ For an attempt to found a neo-Aristotelian ethics on a Darwinian-evolutionary basis, and to account for the value of theoretical understanding in those terms, see Arnhart (1998: 267–272). See also Casebeer (2003: ch. 3).

10.2 The Necessity of Contemplation?

Contemplation, I have argued, not only is subserved by threptic activity, but also authoritatively guides it. Contemplation's role in human life and the human good is roughly parallel to the role of self-nutrition and reproduction in the life (and good) of plants, and perception and locomotion in the life (and good) of nonhuman animals.

Against this suggestion, however, perhaps contemplation's place in human life and the human good radically differs from threptic activity in the lives of plants and perceptive activity in the lives of nonhuman animals. The parallelism I have suggested, it might seem, simply fails to obtain. For on my reading, contemplation makes only *some* contribution to self-maintenance: contemplation actively guides threptic activity, but indirectly. But contemplation's contribution does not seem to be especially necessary for nutrition and reproduction. In other ways of life, by contrast, the authoritative function is really *crucial* for self-maintenance. Moreover, even if contemplation provides cognitive access to truths valuable for practically wise reasoning, contemplation seems to fall short of actively guiding practical reason (and other human life-functions) in anything like the way that the *aisthêtikon* guides the *threptikon*. Contemplative *nous* produces no motion; it contemplates nothing practicable; it says nothing about what to pursue or to flee (*DA* III.9, 432b26–29). Saying that contemplation “actively guides” perhaps seems rhetorically excessive.²

In reply, Aristotle can readily admit that contemplation is not strictly necessary for self-maintenance. Yet his defense of the contemplative life does not conflict with his general account of the good for living organisms. Recall Aristotle's methodological remarks on teleological explanation (as discussed in [Section 4.2](#)): “it would be best to say that, since this is what it is to be a human being, on account of this it has these things; for it cannot be without these parts. If one cannot say this, one should say the next best thing, i.e., either that in general it cannot be otherwise, or that at least it is good thus” (*PA* I.1, 640a33–b1; trans. Lennox; cf. *GA* I.4, 717a15–16). According to Aristotle, a teleological explanation of the strongest form shows how a given part or power is *necessary* for a certain organism's self-maintenance. But a teleological explanation can also indicate how a part or power is nevertheless *good for* an organism's self-maintenance, i.e., how that part or power improves, enhances, or optimizes that organism's abilities to maintain itself.

² Thanks to Eric Brown for pressing these points.

Kidneys, on Aristotle's view, are not strictly necessary for animal survival. Nevertheless, kidneys do provide animals a useful benefit, viz., "that the bladder better performs its function" (*PA* III.7, 670b23–27). So, one can explain an animal's possessing kidneys by spelling out the biological benefits they provide that animal.³ In such cases, what is "better" for an organism need not be strictly necessary for its self-maintenance. To that extent, such better parts (and their associated powers) are, in a certain sense, luxuries: animals without these parts (and powers) do not thereby perish.⁴ Yet such parts and powers are better (or best) for the organism to have. They enable the organism to perform its other functions, *including its necessary functions*, optimally (cf. *Iuv.* 4, 469a28–31). And so, nature does not operate in vain by equipping organisms with such better parts and powers.

Aristotle, I take it, could perhaps deny that human beings must possess and exercise contemplative powers. Perhaps modest kinds of practical rationality are all that human beings strictly must exercise from a threptic perspective. Nevertheless, Aristotle can say, contemplative *nous* is better for human beings to possess. For contemplation of the divine, by providing human beings cognitive access to *horoi* that guide practical reasoning, perfects practical reasoning. Human beings, he can say, maintain themselves better (or best) throughout a complete life when they possess and exercise contemplative *nous* well, and when their contemplation guides their practical reasoning. Hence, even if human beings need not possess contemplative *nous* to meet their threptic needs, one can still explain the human possession of contemplative *nous* teleologically.

This response also handles another potential worry, viz., that the freedom from necessity that Aristotle attributes to contemplation might seem missing on my account. In reply, I argue that contemplation need not be necessary for self-maintenance, but only better for self-maintenance. To this extent, contemplation, on my account, does retain freedom from necessity. In attributing authoritative guidance to contemplative *nous* in human beings, my account does attribute certain limits to contemplation's unqualified leisureliness. But that is only because mortal humanity, in the end, cannot dwell on the Isles of the Blessed. My account need not imply, however, that human beings cannot enjoy contemplation for its own sake. Moreover, on my reading, human contemplation remains maximally leisured and retains maximal freedom from necessity's demands *relative to* other human activities.

³ On the better, see Gotthelf ([1988] 2012: 52–53); Lennox (2001a: 187–189).

⁴ On "luxury" functions," see Sorabji (1964: 294–295).

I now consider the worry that contemplation falls short of authoritatively guiding practical reason in anything like the way that the *aisthêtikon* guides the *threptikon*. To deal with this objection, consider how *aisthêtikon* actively guides. The *aisthêtikon* performs this task by enabling the animal, in a perceptive way, to cognize its good. Perception guides the animal in finding beneficial items in its environment and in avoiding what is harmful. By enabling the animal to identify and secure the former goods, which satisfy threptic needs, the *aisthêtikon* enables the *threptikon* to function at its best and to fulfill its activities as fully as possible.

Contemplation, for its part, provides authoritative guidance by enabling a human being – in a complete, articulate, precise way – to cognize the human good, the target that we all seek. It does so by providing cognitive access to boundary markers of the human good, which delimit virtuous practical reasoning. The insight that contemplation provides enables people to deliberate excellently and choose what is beneficial while avoiding what is harmful. By enhancing human capacities to identify human goods, contemplation enables practical *nous* to function at its best and, ultimately, to satisfy threptic needs. Contemplation's guidance, in these ways, parallels perception's.

On my account, Aristotle denies that contemplation is, by itself, a source of change. It does not itself deliberate about which ends to pursue or flee. But in providing cognitive access to boundary markers of the human good, virtuous contemplative *nous* is the power *in accord with which* complete *phronimoi* ultimately make decisions and act: "Contemplative indeed, then, is this knowledge, but it allows us to produce, in accord with it, everything" (*Protrepticus* 10, 56.2–4/B51). By providing cognitive access to boundary markers of the good, contemplation is useful one way in which philosophy has long been thought helpful, viz., as a guide to human life. Thus, Aristotle's description of the contemplator as a steersman (*Protrepticus* 10, 55.26–56.2/B50). With its focus on the divine, contemplation provides a perspective that best equips the contemplator in discerning how to travel well on the rough seas of mortal life.

10.3 Aristotle on the Uselessness of a Platonic Idea of the Good

Another worry arises on the basis of Aristotle's criticisms of Plato on the Good, criticisms that appear in *EN* I.6 and *EE* I.8. In particular, Aristotle questions whether grasping such an Idea could be usefully action-guiding. Perhaps, Aristotle notes, by using this Idea as a kind of paradigm, "we will also know better the things good for us, and knowing them, we will hit upon them" (μᾶλλον εἰσόμεθα καὶ τὰ ἡμῖν ἀγαθὰ, κἂν εἰδῶμεν, ἐπιτευξόμεθα

αὐτῶν: *EN* I.6, 1097a1–3). Aristotle, however, rejects this thought. (1) No science or art considers or makes use of such an Idea (1097a3–8). Since no practitioner actually refers to such an Idea, Aristotle finds it dubious that such an Idea could be useful for anyone to grasp. (2) It is mysterious how weavers or carpenters, let alone doctors, would benefit their practice from knowing such a universal. Doctors, for instance, do not benefit from grasping the universal “health”; instead, they benefit from grasping human health or the health of particular human beings (1097a8–14). So, does understanding the Prime Mover as final cause of the cosmos threaten to prove just as useless for practice as understanding a Platonic Idea of the Good?

In response, Aristotle indeed denies the usefulness of grasping any separate universal Idea of the Good. Nevertheless, before attacking the argument that such an Idea could be usefully action-guiding, he grants that “the argument has a certain persuasiveness” (1097a3–4). Although Aristotle ultimately denies that universal Ideas are useful for guiding action, he shows himself open to the thought that *some* sort of theoretical understanding could usefully guide practice. Hence, even as he rejects appeals to Platonic Ideas, he explicitly grants that understanding human health (as it pertains to human beings, universally) can usefully guide medical practice. Indeed, Aristotle accepts such a view later in *EN* I.13. And again, at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle reiterates his view that a doctor’s grasping the nature of human health best enables him to attend to particular patients (*EN* X.9, 1180b13–25).

So, while Aristotle rejects the alleged usefulness of any Idea of the Good, he still grants that understanding certain universals (e.g., human health) can be useful, after all. Insofar as contemplating the divine enables one to grasp the human good, however, such contemplation also promises to be useful. To be sure, Aristotle identifies god as the good in the category of substance (*EN* I.6, 1096a23–25; *EE* I.8, 1217b30–31); and such a good invites a certain comparison with an Idea of the Good. Assuming, as I have suggested, that Aristotle’s god is *DA* III.5’s “agent intellect,” which brings all things in the cosmos to light, Aristotle’s god is akin to the Idea of the Good in its guise as the Sun, which enables what is cognizable to be cognized (cf. *Republic* VI.507e–509b).⁵ Yet on my reading of Aristotle, contemplating the divine need not play just the same role in informing

⁵ On *DA* III.5 as a revision of the Platonic Sun-Good analogy, see, e.g., Sprague (1972); Caston (1999: 223–224); Burnyeat (2008: 41–42); Diamond (2014). As Menn (1992: 548–549) observes: “Aristotle criticizes Plato’s positing of an ‘Idea of the good,’ but this phrase is not necessarily equivalent to ‘Good-itself’ . . . Plato’s mistake was not in positing a good-itself, nor in making this separate, but in identifying it with the Idea of the good and not with the final cause.”

practical reasoning for Aristotle that contemplating the Idea of the Good plays for Kallipolis' philosopher-rulers. For contemplating the divine enables contemplators to determine the boundary markers of the distinctively human good in ways spelled out in [Chapter 8](#). My reading, then, coheres with Aristotle's criticisms of Plato.

10.4 Aristotle's Remarks on the *Sophoi*

If Aristotle thinks contemplation enables human beings to obtain standards for guiding their practical reasoning, how should we understand Aristotle's claim (*EN* VI.7, 1141b3–8) that people call Thales and Anaxagoras “contemplatively wise (σοφούς), but not practically wise (φρονίμους)” because these two thinkers appear to be ignorant of what benefits themselves? At first blush, Aristotle seems to view these two *sophoi*, as his audience probably does, as wise men with their heads in the clouds. Unlike his audience, however, he seems to hold that having one's head in the clouds can actually be worthwhile. With respect to Thales, Aristotle seems to adopt the viewpoint of the Thracian servant-girl in the familiar anecdote from Plato's *Theaetetus* (174a). Contemplating, he seems to suggest, is not only consistent with one's lacking practical sense, but is actually apt *to conflict* with one's possessing such sense, for such wisdom draws one's focus away from human affairs. But if so, how can I say that Aristotle thinks contemplation is useful for guiding practical *nous*?

In reply, Aristotle aims in *EN* VI.7 simply to introduce his audience to the *sophia/phronēsis* distinction. Since *sophia* and *phronēsis* were two popular terms for wisdom, and terms that could be used interchangeably, Aristotle must find some way to motivate the distinction. Hence, he appeals to certain common beliefs and prejudices – to what some (unnamed) people “say” (φασιν: 1141b5) about the contemplatively wise.

Aristotle is not necessarily committed to these views without qualification, at least as he states them in *EN* VI.7. For in *Politics* I.11, Aristotle reports that Thales used his knowledge of the stars to predict a good season for the olive harvest, and thus to monopolize the olive presses. In this way, Thales “showed that it is easy for philosophers to be rich if they like, but it is not this about which they are serious” (1259a16–18). Aristotle often takes a dim view of commerce, and he thinks it would be vulgar for *sophia* to *subserve* mere money-making in one's life. Yet Aristotle recognizes, here at least, that certain kinds of contemplation can, in some sense, pay off. Aristotle's remarks on Thales in the *Politics* do not show that Aristotle thought Thales' contemplation provided Thales with an action-guiding

horos. Rather, *Politics* I.11 shows that Aristotle need not accept *EN* VI.7's suggestion that to whatever extent Thales was an excellent contemplator, to that extent he must have lacked practical judgment and a concern for human goods.⁶

As for Anaxagoras, Aristotle actually credits the thinker with an important insight concerning the limitations of what "the many" think: "But Anaxagoras also seems to suppose the happy [person] neither rich nor powerful, saying that he would not be amazed if the happy [person] appeared someone out of place to the many. For these [people] judge by the externals, perceiving of these alone" (*EN* X.8, 1179a13–16). Here, Aristotle gives us reason to doubt the truth of what *EN* VI.7 insists "they" say concerning Anaxagoras. For if the many indeed judge only "by the externals" – and Aristotle apparently agrees with Anaxagoras that "they" do – then they miss something important about the human good. Judging "by the externals," the many think that the contemplator lacks practical wisdom. But by raising doubts here about the many's judgment, Aristotle suggests that we must question this appearance about those who contemplate.

If *sophia* were utterly unconcerned with human goods and provided *no* insight at all into how to obtain them, then it would be strange for Aristotle to highlight the coherence of some of his own views with Anaxagoras' (1179a16–17). With his head in the clouds, Anaxagoras would seem an odd source of authority against which to test views about all-too-human goods. Could Aristotle perhaps have special needs to restrict *sophia* to theoretical contemplation in *EN* VI.7, but otherwise adopt the common usage of *sophia* as that wisdom about practical affairs generally attributed to sophists, lawgivers, and philosophers?⁷ Aristotle need not accept that Anaxagoras possessed *sophia* completely. Yet we still must explain why Aristotle would cite Anaxagoras, of all people, as a *practical* authority in *EN* X.8 if *EN* VI.7 expresses Aristotle's considered views. On the best reading of *EN* X.8, I believe, Aristotle thinks that Anaxagoras has at least some insights into the relative value of human goods in virtue of his contemplating.

⁶ One must take Diogenes Laertius' historical reports with a grain of salt. Yet his account of Thales' life attests to the philosopher's reputation for practical wisdom. In addition to recounting the same anecdote about the olive presses in *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 1.26, Diogenes maintains that Thales was renowned for his excellent political advice (1.25). Diogenes also reports that Thales was given a bowl that Bathycles the Arcadian had insisted "should be given to him who had done most good by his wisdom" (trans. Hicks; 1.28–29). Interestingly, Diogenes attributes the Delphic "know thyself" to Thales (1.40).

⁷ As among "the wise" (τῶν σοφῶν: 1179a17), Aristotle also refers to Solon.

For Aristotle, Anaxagoras was not a *sophos* in the authoritative sense. Yet Aristotle elsewhere speaks well of Anaxagoras. In *EE* I.5, for instance, Aristotle credits Anaxagoras with recognizing that human beings exist for the sake of contemplating the whole order of the cosmos (1216a10–14; cf. *Protrepticus* 9, 51.11–15/B19). In *Metaphysics* A.3, Aristotle applauds Anaxagoras as among those “sober” (νήφων) by comparison with his predecessors for identifying the cause of all order and arrangement in nature with *nous* (984b15–22; cf. *DA* I.2, 404b1–2).⁸ So, on these points, perhaps, Aristotle thinks that Anaxagoras, as a contemplator of divine thinking as a cosmic ordering principle, is worth taking seriously. Anaxagoras’ contemplation enabled him to attain a more-or-less just estimate of the relative value of external goods for human beings.

10.5 *Sophia* without a Prime Mover?

If my account of Aristotle on the uses of contemplation risks being too naturalistic for some, it risks being insufficiently naturalistic for others – namely, those scholars who favor bracketing Aristotle’s remarks on the divine as much as possible. Since forms of “god” and “the divine,” taken together, appear almost twice as often in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as forms of “happiness” and “happy,” such “theology-lite” readings risk distorting Aristotle’s views.⁹ But if my systematic interpretation of Aristotle is correct, then the independent philosophical adequacy of Aristotle’s views on contemplation’s place in the human good depend on the adequacy of Aristotle’s conception of *sophia*, and, ultimately, on his theological views. How far, then, can we go with Aristotle today?

Richard Kraut, for one, thinks that Aristotle’s theology counts against the adequacy of Aristotle’s views on happiness. Kraut asserts that “no one can now believe that here is an eternal unmoved mover who does nothing but think.”¹⁰ Perhaps no one does, in fact, accept Aristotle’s theology. Kraut, however, does not explain why this should be so. Yet this state of

⁸ A full assessment of Aristotle’s views on Anaxagoras would examine his influence on Pericles. Here, one should consider Socrates’ claims (in *Phaedrus* 270a–c) that Pericles benefited from his encounter with Anaxagoras and his teaching about *nous* in conjunction with Aristotle’s remarks on Pericles in *EN* VI.5, 1140b8–10, which emphasize Pericles’ (relative) *phronēsis*. Socrates’ treatment of Pericles and Anaxagoras in *Alcibiades* 118c ff – to say nothing of Socrates’ remarks on Anaxagoras in *Phaedo* 97c–99c – are generally negative. Hence, Socrates’ comments in the *Phaedrus* might be ironic. Even if so, however, Socrates’ attitude need not be purely negative.

⁹ See Hare (2007: 19–20), who also discusses the limitations of “de-theologized” readings of Aristotle’s ethics.

¹⁰ Kraut (1989: 354).

affairs is interesting. For when one surveys the diversity of positions that occupy center stage in contemporary metaphysical debate, as well as the views that both historians of philosophy and philosophers of religion continue to accept as live options, one wonders whether Aristotelian theology is really *that* far beyond the pale. As things stand, I offer no considered view about the ultimate adequacy of Aristotle's theology. A fuller discussion is a task for another work. But Aristotle could respond to Kraut's claim in two ways.

(1) A long series of intellectual developments led thinkers in the West to reject large parts of Aristotle's worldview, and with it, his theology. Still, Aristotle could point out that philosophical theism has not yet disappeared; nor has the project of natural theology to which Aristotle was an early contributor.¹¹ Such projects gain whatever support they do from the human experience of a world that seems orderly enough, even if lacking the neat geocentrism that Aristotle fancied. It seems safe to say that there is no first heaven that literally moves in circles out of love for the Prime Mover. Nor should we accept Aristotle's distinction between sublunary and celestial matter. Yet natural theology as such need not assume these specific theses; nor, does it seem, must Aristotle. Further, natural theology need not commit itself to certain popular conceptions of the divine (as possessing omnibenevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence as traditionally construed). To whatever extent natural theology remains a viable enterprise, perhaps it will be on a firmer footing if it proceeds in a more minimalist, Aristotelian vein.

(2) Perhaps Aristotle could accept Kraut's judgment that Prime Mover theology is best abandoned. Even then, Aristotle could argue, in the terms of *PA* I.5's protreptic to the study of animals, that the natural world is capable of sparking wonder and awe. And to the extent our sublunary world *is* orderly and capable of being understood, human beings will take intrinsic pleasure in understanding it. But such understanding requires intellectual virtues akin to the one Aristotle calls *sophia*.¹² Among the inhabitants of the natural world that human beings will seek to understand

¹¹ For a contemporary effort to articulate a quasi-Aristotelian conception of *sophia* along natural theological lines, see Conway (2000), though, in my estimation, he assimilates Aristotle's Prime Mover too closely to the creator God of the Abrahamic tradition. For recent defenses of Aristotelian-Thomistic arguments for the existence of a First Mover, see, e.g., Oderberg (2010) and Feser (2013: 159–163).

¹² I articulate, and defend, a contemporary neo-Aristotelian conception of *sophia* in Walker (2013). See also Baehr (2012) and (2014), as well as Riggs (2003).

are *human beings*, with their embodied, mortal, less-than-eternally active contemplative powers and life-functions. In exercising a more modest form of *sophia*, which would take human beings and their capacities as belonging to its paradigmatic objects, theoretical contemplators could still attain a measure of self-knowledge, and thereby derive boundary markers of excess and deficiency for the ethical sphere. Even then, by guiding our practical reasoning, and by indirectly contributing to our self-maintenance, contemplation would show its usefulness.

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